History of the Women's Prison

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**Introduction**

Women criminals throughout history have been referred to the as doubly deviant. There are two reasons for this; first, because they violated a law that was enacted by a society that was largely dominated by the men (Rafter, 1983). Second, they transgressed the narrow moral boundary in which they were supposed to act (Rafter, 1983). Until some decades ago, women in western society were treated as a second class citizen. Moreover, women have been subjugated to the wishes and will of the men that dominated western society. Because the women criminals not only violated the law but also transgressed from their status of a secondary citizen, they were viewed not only as a criminal but also as a moral suspect (Rafter, 1983).

**Discussion**

Before the development of any prisons for the women criminals, there were various ways in which women were granted punishment for their crimes. Women who committed serious crimes were deprived of their lives either by burning or hanging (Rafter, 1983). Furthermore, some societies banished women criminal from their communities. For instance, women who were found involved in adultery or murder were burned to death during the Middle Ages. Additionally, women who committed crimes of lesser serious extend experienced physical ordeal. For instance, women were forced to wear a mask known as brank intended to humiliate them for gossiping about their spouses (Rafter, 1983).

It was until the late 19th century when western society contemplated alternatives punishments for women criminals. Before the development of any modern infrastructure of prison, houses of correction were built. These houses were built with the intent to confine the women criminals as well as teach them to reform their behavior for the future. With the advancements in transportation systems, women criminals were forcibly sent to the colonies in Australia and America. Sadly, most of the transported women were forced to fulfill the sexual desires of men in the colonies (Rafter, 1983).

The next milestone in the history of prison for women was the penitentiary. Dungeons and castles were dedicated to serving as jails for women who violate the law (Rafter, 1983). In England, one of the very first penitentiaries was founded when prostitutes were sent into it. Although this was the beginning of prisons for the women, still most of the women saw themselves locked down with men without proper arrangements to respect their privacy. The women who were imprisoned with men were deprived of food, clothing, and bedding. Therefore, to gain these necessities, women were often forcibly engaged in sexual acts with male inmates. Although these penitentiaries were aimed to educate the transgressors, these correctional centers were a nightmare for the women. The penitentiaries for the women had little or no proper sanitation. Most of the times, the centers were overcrowded. Furthermore, there was a lack of sustainable funding for the penitentiaries. The guard force exacerbated matters further. Not only were they untrained and unprofessional, but they were also morally corrupt too.

During the Jacksonian era, the Americans came up with their idea of prison (Rafter, 1983). However, their underlying principles were the same as the penitentiaries in England. A very little number of women were placed in these penitentiaries. Although these penitentiaries were aimed to educate women for their future, they proved to be a scourge for the women who were placed in them. According to Robert Johnson, the women placed in the penitentiaries were not considered human. The administration treated women in the worst possible way. Majority of the women saw themselves placed in prisons that offered no reformative plans. According to Pollock-Byrne, the health and the safety of the women was jeopardized and compromised (Pollock & Pollock-Byrne, 2002). That was because the American prisons were like English prisons (Pollock & Pollock-Byrne, 2002). There was no proper sanitation, food, bedding, and safety (Pollock & Pollock-Byrne, 2002). Most of the women were locked in rooms that had no safety at all and we're open to attacks from the prison's administration (Pollock & Pollock-Byrne, 2002). Both the male staff and inmates abused women sexually in these so-called reformative prisons. Freedman holds the view that women faced the most terrible form of treatment. Women prisoners were subjected to rape and subsequent illegitimate births. According to Dobash, women were treated very differently from men and deprived of all the necessities (Dobash, Dobash & Gutteridge, 1986).

During 1816, Elizabeth Fry started advocating better prison conditions for women. After the relentless efforts of Elizabeth Fry, prisons for women were divided into two parts. First one was known as custodial and the second was known as a reformatory. The custodial prisons were based on the principles of the traditional prisons aimed for retribution of women criminals. Contrarily, the reformatory prison was intended to provide separate jails for women along with programs aimed to help them in the future. The women who were jailed in reformatory prisons were trained in cooking, laundry, and sewing.

**Conclusion**

During the 1930s, reformatory prisons gained traction with the society advocating for this kind of confinement institutions for the women. Although both the custodial and reformatory concepts have merged since 1930, there is a room for improvement as far as prisons of women are concerned. The condition of most of the prisons today is far from satisfactory. The women that are confined in modern prisons face neglect of all sorts. The programs that are being offered in these prisons need to be reconciled with the challenging world in which the women would step out after serving their sentence. For instance, women need to educated about the emerging technologies across the globe and provided hands-on experience to earn themselves a respectable earning.

**References**

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