

Assaults on staff and riots in prisons are on the rise. With record hitting numbers of women working in prisons today, Grace Brewer explores what it's like to be a female prison officer.

Not for Girls?

Tying her hair up and handing over her mobile phone in exchange for keys, a radio and a rather heavy baton, Senior Officer Lois Carpenter begins her day by unlocking the main gate at HMP Lewes and heading for F wing. "If you work on the sex offender's wing, it's usually calmer, there's less violence" she says. "People can get quite complacent because sexual offenders tend to be the older generation but the risk is the same. And if you're female you have to be a bit more aware of that." Lois began working in the prison service at 26-years-old but was never surprised at the level of violence. "People who have been here a long time remember what it was like when it was less violent. I've only been here 2 years but it's a prison... I expect there to be violence."

The East Sussex establishment was declared a 'red site' after prisoners went on a rampage in October. "We had between 6 and 8 prisoners refusing to lock up at the end of the association period and there were only 4 staff on the wing at the time." Lois recalls the incident as she walks into the concrete courtyard opposite the wing.

"One of the prisoners became incredibly volatile, he threatened the staff with a pool cue, they were outnumbered and made the decision to leave." It took 6 hours for staff to gather control and restraint teams from other prisons and execute a plan. "I'm sure you can imagine the amount of damage that 7 men can do in that time... there was a lot of flooding and broken glass. Unfortunately, the entire wing was written off," she says. Lewes wasn't the first establishment to experience a riot like this. 2016 saw staff members held hostage at HMP Exeter, 2 prisoners escape from Pentonville, £1m worth of damage caused in the Bedford riot and 240 men were moved from HMP Birmingham following one of the worst prison riots in 25 years.

In July, assaults on staff hit a record high with 15 attacks on officers happening every day in UK prisons. But the National Offender Management Service released figures showing a different rise all together. The number of women in the job reached its highest ever, with 46.8% of staff, female. A huge 10.07% increase since 2013. It seems

despite the budget cuts and staffing shortages, more women than ever before are working in male prisons. And with this high-testosterone environment becoming increasingly more violent, is this a job for girls?

Lois unlocks and re-locks an array of bolted iron doors before reaching the open wing. The A-category prisoners' residence. The men are on their 'association' period, their cells are unlocked for 2-3 hours a day when prisoners can socialise, clean their rooms or make phone calls. A group of men are leant against the pool table in the corridor and wolf whistle as Lois enters. She awkwardly ignores their cat calls and makes her way to the small office protected by metal bars. "Generally, I find that most of them are really respectful." Lois refers to the inmates outside the office. "Some of the younger ones make inappropriate comments, but not necessarily in a malicious way, in that laddish way that you would get if you were out at the pub and there was a group of lads." Reminding prisoners of the >>



boundary between what's acceptable and inappropriate is a daily task.

At 5ft 5 and still fairly new in the prison, Lois describes how some inmates see her age and gender as a weakness. "Obviously there are different ways male prisoners can abuse you." She looks up at the men now playing pool. "There are threats of sexual violence. Being called a slag and a slut is not something that a male officer will deal with." She sees herself as lucky to not have experienced much of this abuse. "I did have one incident where I was running visits a few months ago, I had 2 separate prisoners in about 5 minutes call me a slag, right in my face." In a room filled with tables of prisoners and their visitors waiting just outside, two men becoming angry can swiftly turn to aggression. Being physically small is what worries Lois in situations like that. "I had 3 female officers with me and 2 older male colleagues, I'd have felt better if the balance was different and I was in the company of younger, stronger male officers."

Female staff at the prison said they must be constantly aware of themselves as women when working with male prisoners, something men in the job don't have to worry about. Women are advised not to wear makeup or jewellery to work and to tie their hair in a bun, instead of a pony tail which could be grabbed with ease. They have to remind themselves never to sit in a cell, always talk to prisoners in an office and never let the men put them in a position where they're not comfortable. Most of which does not apply to male

officers. Madeline Petrillo teaches gender and crime at Portsmouth University. In 2006 she researched the gender issues female Probation Officers face when working with high risk men. Madeline talked about gendered manipulation, the ways in which male prisoners can "charm female officers or intimidate them to take control of situations." Women in male prisons experience their work as gendered. How they position themselves, how they talk to prisoners and what they choose to disclose must always be professional. She also found that officers who became mothers had a much harder time working with sexual offenders or men who had committed abuse against women or children. Knowing men that they see daily, had hurt a child or raped a woman became "harder for them to detach their work from what they were experiencing emotionally. They talked about a loss of innocence and becoming more vigilant about themselves and other women in their family." Senior Officer Zoe Payne is one of many women at HMP Lewes who said their relationships had broken down due to their work. "The person I was with said that I'd completely changed." Zoe explains how she would never speak to her partner about her work to protect him from worrying. She said the role of a prison officer makes a person "a lot more realistic. But I think people who are not exposed to it can sometimes interpret it as you becoming quite harsh."

One of the prisoners is given

permission to offer his opinion on female officers. Leigh Bridle is serving life imprisonment for wounding with intent. Approaching 9 years into his sentence, Bridle is housed on a C-category wing at the prison. Cast aside images of muscly men with shaved heads, covered in tattoos. The 37-year-old is 'normal' looking, an average man of small build. He rummages freely in a cleaning cupboard next to his cell whilst talking. "If I'm angry about something, I prefer having a male prison officer. But if they're female, they know we're not going to clobber them." As he waits for an officer on duty to fill the shelves with toilet roll, he explains how most inmates treat women with respect and those who don't are often targeted by other prisoners behind closed doors. Expert, Madeline sees the effect women have on prison environment as powerful, she suggests more women are being employed in male prisons as a technique to de-escalate conflict with inmates. Bridle believes having women in the prison changes the atmosphere and makes it "less aggressive." He says "female screws are more compassionate. They seem to care more. They're softer, patient and understanding."

A fat, bald man stops to interject the conversation. Bridle introduces him as Neil Ballard, one of his friends on the wing. "That's a generalisation" Ballard adds. "Bitch screws are the same as male screws. There's a small minority that are soft." Research has shown the hyper-masculine prison environment, being surrounded by male prisoners and male officers, can result in women feeling under pressure to minimise any typically female characteristics at work. Madeline warns against stereotyping in her teaching: "I don't want to fall into the trap of saying women bring more of a caring and nurturing atmosphere to the prison. I'm sure some do, but definitely not all women."

So dealing with cat calls, manipulation from prisoners and a complete loss of innocence is all in a day's work for a female officer, making the role extremely different for men and women. And by treating all staff equally, gender specific training isn't on offer for women. People ask "is it a job for girls?" Lois and Zoe think so: "I've built great working relationships with people, it can be difficult but every so often, you manage to help someone and it's rewarding." Zoe agrees: "It's definitely a career and I think women bring an awful lot to the service. Without a doubt." ●



Drone footage above HMP Lewes, photo by David Grimwade