

## Turning Gender Inside-Out: Delivering Higher Education in Women's Carceral Spaces

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**Abstract:** *This article is a critical reflection of the role of gender in the delivery of a higher education course based on the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Programme. Related concepts such as hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity, and intersectionality are discussed within the prison education setting. This reflection primarily draws on critical incidents from the experiences of the first three authors facilitating a higher education course in a women's prison in England. One major reflection is that learning in a group of "inside" and "outside" students, all self-identified women, who vary along the dimensions of age, class, ethnicity, nationality and sexual expression, presented unique dynamics. This included working with both collectiveness and difference, gender-aligned expectations about behaviour, and experiences of control, criminal justice and higher education. Additionally, all four authors' experiences of delivering various higher education courses under different prison-education partnership models in both men and women's prisons allows for comparison and reflection on the institutional reproduction of gender norms. These reflections point to the conclusion that, despite the strong presence of intersectional divisions, gender can become a uniting force when working with an all-women student group, fostering critical thinking and engagement with challenging structural issues. However, further reflection considers that being gender-conscious in the classroom should not be limited to all-women student cohorts, as this is exactly what may enable facilitators to tackle some of the issues produced by hegemonic masculinity in a mixed prison classroom.*

**Keywords:** *Prison education, gender, Inside-Out Prison Exchange Programme, women's prison, England and Wales*

The carceral space, like so many others, is a gendered one (Carlen, 2002; Barberet, 2014). Some authors argue that women experience the 'pains of imprisonment' more harshly than their male counterparts (Matthews, 2009; Crewe et al., 2017). The recently launched Female Offender Strategy in England and Wales might represent a policy step towards recognition that outcomes of incarceration can be worse for women than men (Ministry of Justice, 2018a). Situated in these broader criminal justice conditions, this article aims to critically reflect on gendered themes in the experience of delivering Higher Education (HE) in carceral settings, drawing on the authors' collective knowledge and experiences of teaching HE courses in prison. Specific attention is given to a course built on the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Programme model (known as Inside-Out), delivered inside a women's prison in England by the first two authors of this article, with support from the third author. Where relevant, the article also draws out comparative reflections on the delivery of a similarly modelled Inside-Out course inside an English men's prison where the third author was one of the facilitators. The first three of the authors have received training and are certified facilitators of the Inside Out Prison Exchange Programme, while the fourth author has delivered similar courses within differently modelled prison-university partnerships. The term "we" is used throughout to encompass the reflections of the four authors of this article.



The article begins by contextualising the operational setting, including discussion of the gendered nature of the prison institution. We follow with a short introduction to the Inside-Out model. Then, we discuss the value of critical reflection as both a method and a practice for advancing teaching and learning scholarship (Brookfield, 1995). In an attempt to disentangle some of the central issues which arose during the Inside-Out course delivery, we draw on critical incidents (Tripp, 1995) as illustrative examples that typify certain dynamics. We use these critical incidents as points of contention to unearth the gendered dynamics of prison classrooms. Alongside the central position of gender in the article, we refer to related concepts, such as hegemonic masculinity, sexism, heteronormativity, and intersectionality, as theoretical backdrops to our observations and reflections. It should be noted, however, that this paper does not set out to test any individual theory, nor is it based on a pre-determined research design and subsequent data collection. Rather, it is based on thematic and systematic recollection of our observations and reflections in the aftermath of teaching, with gender as the organising praxis. We specifically reflect on what can be learnt from being gender-conscious in the classroom. Through our observations and reflections, we suggest that, when consciously integrated into practice, gender can be a powerful tool to foster critical thinking and a uniting force in an environment otherwise rife with power differentials and intersectional divisions.

### Gender and Incarcerated Women's Experiences

Driven by feminist efforts, criminology has recently seen an increasing amount of attention being given to the experiences of women involved in the criminal justice system. This gradual movement from the very margins of the field has meant that we now know more about the plight of the female carceral experience than ever before (Silvestri and Crowther-Dowey, 2008). Gender is, in Heidensohn's (2002) words, no longer neither invisible nor ignored. A consequence of this is the growing knowledge that gender is a relevant factor for the prisoner experience, challenging the longstanding assumption—related to the dominance of positivism in the field—that the particular (i.e. men's perspective) can be situated as the general (Naffine, 1997). This idea that masculine criminological theories can just “add women and stir” is, as pointed out by Irwin and Chesney-Lind (2008), deeply flawed because it neglects gendered realities of crime and punishment. Although some variations have been detected across different penal settings (Österman, 2018), studies have found that women report more negative prison experiences compared to their male counterparts (Matthews, 2009; Crewe et al., 2017). This is especially evident in areas such as psychological well-being, intimacy, autonomy/control, and loss of family contact (Crewe et al., 2017). The biographical experiences of women's pathways into prison cannot be divorced from these findings.

There are smaller numbers of dedicated female prison establishments, both in England and Wales and globally, which not only means a wider spread geographically, but also that they need to cater for a more varied population (Ministry of Justice, 2018a). The *type* of training and support available is also important. A concentration on domestic and beauty training in female facilities has led feminist scholars to argue that prison is often utilised as a tool to *re-feminise* the female, adapting her to more traditional forms of femininity (Barberet, 2014). Illustrated for example, by beauty pageants held inside female prison institutions, Moral et al. (2009) argue that the incarcerated female body becomes a particular target for social control, aiming to re-educate the female prisoner into a suitable form of womanhood. Indeed, research has repeatedly found that women in criminal justice are judged on gendered ideals, including constructions of female “respectability” relating to factors such as motherhood, sexual conduct and lifestyle choices (Carlen, 1983; Hudson, 2002; Kruttschnitt, 1982). The female law-breaker is thus not only being judged as an offender, but also as a woman (Lloyd, 1995); the well-known “doubly deviant, doubly damned” argument (Heidensohn, 1996; 2002; Lloyd, 1995).

Situated in these broader gendered contexts of punishment, it is important—maybe especially so at a time when participation in education and other purposeful activities in prison, is reducing (Prison Reform Trust, 2017)—to also reflect on the carceral educational experience through the lens of gender.

## The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Programme in a Women's Prison

The following discussion focuses primarily on a credit-bearing course delivered as part of a prison-university partnership between a female prison and a university in England. The course began with 22 enrolled female students<sup>1</sup>, 11 of whom were incarcerated (referred to as “inside students”) and 11 of whom were undergraduate criminology students (known as “outside students”). Grounded in an embodied, critical and collaborative pedagogy (Fischman and McLaren, 2005; Nguyen and Larson, 2015), Inside-Out is a unique educational programme that offers undergraduate students the opportunity to study together with individuals who are currently serving time within a prison setting. The approach is based on a dialogic and peer-focussed learning model (Pompa, 2013)<sup>2</sup> and has, since its inception in the USA in 1997, proven to produce ground-breaking results and experiences for learners on both the *inside* and the *outside*.

While the particular challenges and rewards of delivering Inside-Out inspired programmes have been discussed in the North American context (Allred, 2009; 2013; Hyatt, 2009; Link, 2016; Maclaren, 2015; Pollack, 2014; Van Gundy, Bryant and Starks, 2013), much less is known about the British setting, as Inside-Out was only introduced to the UK in 2014. Moreover, reflecting that the vast majority of prison-university partnerships have been delivered within male prisons (Prisoners' Education Trust, 2018), these discussions have to date not focused on a female prison in England, nor on an all-female cohort of students. Hence, these deserve scholarly reflection.

Though the Inside-Out model is unique in its delivery and set up, universities have been operating in the prison estate of England and Wales for many decades, most notably through the Open University. However, recently there has been a proliferation of new and diverse prison-university partnerships. A recent study in countries across Europe and the US shows the breadth of diversity in partnership style, ranging from full degrees being offered in prisons, to informal mentoring by students at a university for those who are studying while incarcerated (Champion, 2018). Since the first UK Inside-Out partnership was implemented at the University of Durham in 2014, the rate at which new local partnerships have emerged has increased exponentially, with subjects and disciplines ranging from criminology and philosophy, to law and creative writing. In 2018, The Prisoners' Education Trust's PUPiL (Prison University Partnerships in Learning) network counted 54 current partnership projects across the UK (Prisoners' Education Trust, 2018).

Despite rising numbers of prison-university partnerships, access to further education and higher-level studies on the inside remains a challenge. In 2015-16, under the government funded OLASS<sup>3</sup> educational contracts, a mere 100 learners in prison achieved a level 3 outcome (equivalent to an A level) in comparison to 26,600 learners achieving a level 2 (equivalent to a GCSE at grade A\*-C). With no OLASS funded level 4 outcomes (equivalent to first year of HE), students in prison must seek higher-level studies themselves, outside the prison classroom (DfE and ESFA, 2017). Last year, the Prisoners' Education Trust funded nearly 3000 distance learning courses. However, with provisions such as these being made available overwhelmingly through correspondence courses, this study experience can be both isolating and challenging. Prison-university partnerships can offer more relational and dialogic learning spaces in ways that much existing prison-based provision cannot.

The reasons for delivering the Inside-Out course in a female institution was triggered by a shared concern between the first two authors of this article that there are lesser opportunities for incarcerated women to become involved in prison-university partnerships (Prisoners' Education Trust, 2018). This concern was combined with the second author's research and expertise working with women in the criminal justice system (Österman, 2018). That said, the original aim of the course was not to create a gender-specific group dynamic. Thus, recruitment on the outside was open to both female and male university students. However, no male students applied for the course—possibly reflecting the dominance of female students overall in the area of social studies (HESA, 2018). It is also worthwhile emphasising that all facilitators who were involved in the delivery of the course were female. Again, this was not intentional but accidental (although it may not be completely coincidental, as criminologists working on women and gender are, indeed, more likely to be female themselves; see Hughes, 2005). The all-female presence produced a particular dynamic in the group, which in turn shaped the course content and delivery. The use of all-female spaces is on the increase in the wider criminal justice field, where there is a growing consensus that a gender-specific approach is necessary for the development of effective policy and practice (Clinks, 2014; Ministry of Justice, 2018b).

## On Reflection

Critical reflection has become increasingly formalised and established as a tool for both research and practice in education literature and beyond (see for example, Davis and Roswell, 2013; Fendler, 2003; Howard, 2003; Harrison, Lawson and Wortley, 2005). In particular, the work of Fook and Garner (2007) and their model of critical reflective practice, has brought this previously marginalised area further into the mainstream (Hickson, 2011). As is well evidenced in classic education literature (Mezirow, 1998; Smyth, 1989), explicitly or implicitly, facilitators aim to stimulate critical reflection in the classroom, regarding it as pivotal to students' learning.

After a period of occupying the proverbial "comfort zone", the practice of critical reflection has been revisited and resurrected in feminist scholarship, taking inspiration from Irigaray to critique the gendered nature of reflective practice in reproducing masculinist tropes (Galea, 2012), as well as highlighting the importance of embodied experiences (Leigh and Bailey, 2013). In her genealogical analysis, Fendler (2003) traces the origins of reflective practice through the work of critical scholars, highlighting its ties to feminist traditions. The authors share a strong sense of belonging to such traditions and endorse Larrivee's (2000) understanding of critical reflection as a process of merging "critical inquiry, the conscious consideration of the ethical implications and consequences of teaching practice, with self-reflection, deep examination of personal beliefs, and assumptions about human potential and learning" (p. 293).

Critical reflection is often accompanied by discussion of critical incidents (Tripp, 1995; Cope and Watts, 2000; Griffin, 2003; Bruster and Peterson, 2013) which, in our case, refers to reflection upon particular events in the classroom. For Griffin (2003, p. 208), a "critical incident provides a deeper and more profound level of reflection because it goes beyond a detailed description of an event that attracted attention, to analysis of and reflection on the meaning of the event". Identifying critical incidents allows us to ponder on the meaning of events observed in the classroom through application of the theoretical tools at our disposal. We can thus apply our understanding of gender, hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity, sexism, inequality and intersectionality to analyse what we observed in prison classrooms.

Incidentally, critical reflection is central to the Inside-Out programme and curriculum, imbuing every aspect of the learning and facilitation process, from classroom engagement and discussion to assessment. Posing a challenge to the dominant paradigm of individually-led academic learning environments, we believe that team-facilitating a course produces fertile ground for critical reflection. The opportunity to facilitate learning in a team, rather than solo, provides an otherwise generally absent space for collective exchange and reflection. As such, we found ourselves in ideal conditions to engage in such reflection and exchange. By developing this reflection in a structured fashion, through collaborative dialogue, discussion and writing among the authors, we aim to inform our current and future pedagogical thinking and practice, while also opening ourselves up for scrutiny and encouraging further debate in this area. Whilst we did not engage in any formal, structured journal-keeping, we did exchange notes via email and text messages after every session, alongside regular face-to-face meetings.

Howard (2003) argues that culturally relevant pedagogy is attuned with the practice of critical reflection in teaching. Accordingly, "teachers must be able to construct pedagogical practices that have relevance and meaning to students' social and cultural realities" (Howard, 2003, p. 195). The significance of this is twofold: On the one hand, this validates critical reflection as a worthwhile method to inform teaching practice and, to a degree, teachers' understanding of the implications of their practice. On the other hand, it ties critical reflection to a pedagogy that is attuned to students' lived experiences and understandings. Following Howard (2003), the authors of this article understand critical reflective practice to be both iterative and responsive; it responds to students' structural and intersectional makeup and to the broader social and cultural environment they inhabit. It thus facilitates the integration of content and discussion that is relevant to the particular student group. We elaborate on this throughout the article, specifically in terms of integrating gender in curriculum and activity development in response to an all-female student cohort.

In order to safeguard the confidentiality and anonymity of our students, the authors have not identified the particular partner institutions, and have not referred to individual students' contributions in classroom discussions. The authors have, however, referred to general similarities and differences in the classroom along

the central structural category of gender, but also age, ethnic background, nationality, sexuality and class. We have retained the categorisation, and distinction, between inside and outside students, given that this differentiation is foundational to the practices of the programme, reflecting existing power differentials as well as testing the egalitarian principles that inform it. Yet, the focus of this article is firmly placed on our reflections, and reference to classroom activities and discussions are offered specifically to contextualise such reflections.

On a discursive point, it is important to note the biological construct of “sex” (i.e. female and male) and the social construct of “gender” (i.e. woman and man) are often conflated in many societal institutions, including prisons, and the categories within gender and sex are presented as binary and definitive identities (Butler, 1990). For the purpose of consistency in this article, we use phrases such as “incarcerated women” and “female prisoners” interchangeably, as well as the phrases “male prisoners” and “incarcerated men” as synonyms. This choice of language is not meant to reinforce the gender/sex conflation, nor to marginalise the experiences of trans and gender fluid prisoners but is arguably an accurate reflection of how categories of gender (and sex) are understood and reproduced in the prison system. In this context, and arguably in mainstream, heteronormative culture, gender is largely presented as a dichotomous category. By referencing this dichotomy (and acknowledging the problematic usage here), we conceptualise and reflect on gendered experiences in a penal system that separates females from males and reinforces social and cultural stereotypes of femininity and masculinity.

### **The Learning and Teaching Experience Across Gendered Institutions**

The following is an articulation of our discussions about delivering Inside-Out in different prison institutions. From a teaching perspective, delivering Inside-Out courses inside a prison setting was a challenge regardless of the type of institution, although some notable gendered differences occurred. Being a controlled setting, which limits freedom of movement at the very least, the prison classroom became a place of negotiation between freedom of thought and the types of constraints that are not typical of most HE environments. However, discipline and surveillance have, traditionally, taken different forms in women and men’s institutions. While Connell’s (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity has been criticised as reductive (Demetriou, 2001), it is a useful tool for understanding the gender dynamics and the performance of masculinity in various spaces, including within the prison walls (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2001). Hegemonic masculinity is understood in the current context as a collection of actions and ideological underpinnings of those actions that perpetuate the normative form of masculinity within the patriarchal design of gender ideals, including assumptions of heterosexuality and intrinsic aggressiveness (Connell, 1995).

During the men’s prison security training, photographs of various types of weapons that had been confiscated from offenders were showcased to the outside students. This was coupled with instructions to outside students on how to set off alarms and alert prison staff if needed; stressing a sense of threat of physical violence. As this was most outside students’ first introduction to the prison environment, the training signalled intrinsic expectations of hegemonic masculinity that would play out during the course. In contrast, the security talk for the course in the women’s prison focused primarily on the potential opportunities for grooming and manipulation by the incarcerated women towards the outside students, with only vague alluding statements about the potential for violence to occur. These differences in security talks typify gendered assumptions of risk and surveillance. Such differences were further evident in classroom dynamics and clothing surveillance, or lack thereof, as a risk management strategy underpinned by the dominance of masculinist, heteronormative expectations.

**Heteronormative sexual tension and hegemonic masculinity in the classroom.** One of the biggest differences observed in delivering Inside-Out in a men’s versus a women’s prison was the underlying heteronormative assumptions and associated sexual tension that reverberated throughout the delivery of the course in the male institution. While not assuming that the all-female group was exclusively made up of heterosexual orientations, sexual tension—and the management of it—did not play a role in the classroom. This presented a marked difference in our experiences of the classroom and its management. In line with the overall undergraduate criminology student body (HESA, 2018), most outside students who took part in the Inside-Out course in the men’s prison consisted of female undergraduates. This created a visible gender divide between inside and

outside students, with gendered heteronormative assumptions playing out in different ways and to varying degrees. Two examples in which hegemonic masculinity was exhibited in the men's prison include the dynamics of classroom behaviour and the clothing surveillance imparted on the outside students.

The performativity of hegemonic masculinity within the classroom manifested itself through verbose posturing by some inside students that were akin to disruptive school-age actions—that is, interrupting class discussion, throwing small items to get each other's attention, and engaging in side conversations. Such behaviours do, of course, exist in some contexts in more conventional classroom settings; however, this was experienced as amplified in the prison context. Although it was not strictly a case of all male inside students being disruptive and all female outside students attentively engaging in learning activities, the challenges of classroom control within the men's prison tended to be a manifestation of hegemonic norms of masculine verbosity as an expression of flirtation. It should be recognised that the underlying sexual tension between inside and outside students was bi-directional and largely operated within a heteronormative context. The enactment of such tension was, however, often initiated by masculine posturing. In consequence, in order to foster an environment conducive to collaborative learning, facilitators' attention and energy had to be directed towards managing these specific classroom dynamics, including monitoring behaviour between students above and beyond the group learning task at hand. Not only did this add an extra layer of work, but it was also an uncomfortable role for facilitators to assume, and one that arguably impacted on the ability to fully foster the ethos of transformative education. There was notably less classroom disruption in the women's prison. While the authors can only hypothesise about the role of gendered norms and sexual attraction, or lack thereof, within this, the different dynamics it produced resulted in observably distinct learning environments.

Hegemonic masculinity also appeared as an operational facet of the prison beyond the education wing. For example, prison staff in both the men's and women's institutions referred to outside students as 'ladies', and in the women's institution, this label extended to inside students as well. The underlying fear that the presence of a group of primarily young women inside the men's prison would cause disruption was communicated implicitly and explicitly by prison staff throughout the course. This aligns with the sexist rape culture narrative that heterosexual men are unable to control themselves around women (Harding, 2015). One way for the institution to enforce control over the underlying sexual tensions supposedly generated by women's presence into a controlled men's environment, was through dress. Dress codes, and the controlling of women's clothing in particular, is policed within and beyond prison environments (Montemurro and Gillen, 2013). In the men's prison however, outside students' dress was a central and gendered point of contention. In both the men's and women's prisons, inside students, like outside students, wore civilian clothes rather than a prison uniform. A "modest" dress code was implemented for outside students entering the men's prison, which included clothing that covered the body in a loose-fitting fashion. The surveillance of outside students' clothing was made through passing comments by prison staff, and reinforced gendered tropes of choices being equated with "appropriate" or "inappropriate" demeanour. Implementing a strict dress code was a way for the prison to manage the tension of our presence within it, and accordingly adhere to a system of gendered surveillance. In turn, this placed the facilitators in the extremely uncomfortable position of monitoring outside students' clothing. The facilitators were vocal about their opposition to this policing with both students and partnering prison staff.

The point here is not that inside students and prison staff all embodied one unified form of hegemonic masculinity, but that normative assumptions about expressions of masculinity impacted the gendered environment in which Inside-Out was delivered. The contention around dress codes and its policing was entirely absent in the women's prison context, reflecting the gendered and heteronormative assumption that, in an all-female environment, any concern of sexualised behaviour expressed through dress is not relevant.

**An all-female group dynamic: emphasising collective sentiments, recognising difference** The all-female cohort of the women's prison Inside-Out course created an opportunity to foster cohesion in the group based on a shared gender identity, encouraging the formation of a safe learning space. The importance of creating a safe space is well understood and embedded in the Inside-Out programme practice (Atiya et al., 2013), as facilitators are trained to instruct students to generate classroom guidelines through discussion and rectifying such guidelines in a dialogic and democratic fashion. Arao and Clemens (2013) identify this process as pivotal. In this regard, a safe space is not necessarily gender specific. However, a degree of familiarity with others by way of at least one shared identity, i.e. "being female", is likely to promote a sense of group

belonging. This chimes well with the previously mentioned trend in criminal justice policy and practice to promote all-female spaces, under the assumption that women will have experiences and needs that are specific, and that the environments that a male-dominated system produces may be ill-equipped to respond to such needs.

The course curriculum for the women's institution was initially developed by combining insights and activities from the Inside-Out instructor manual together with the facilitators' interests, research backgrounds, and experience. It was only when the cohort was finalised that an iterative process began to adapt the course to an all-female group, with gender as a prominent feature. This adaptation was deemed important, not only in terms of making the teaching and learning relevant to a UK prison context, but also—with the knowledge that women have been and continue to be slotted into a male-dominated system (Heidensohn, 1996)—to ensure that the curriculum was relevant to the female lived experience of incarceration, criminalisation and criminal justice. This was translated into the teaching and learning design in a number of ways, such as choosing poem readings that related to women experiences, as well as including topics that spoke to gendered issues, such as prostitution policy. Maya Angelou's poem "Phenomenal Woman" was for example co-performed by the entire group, with each student reading one line while sitting in a circle. Sitting in a circle to start and end each class is a central aspect of the Inside-Out ethos (Davis and Roswell, 2013). The experience of taking turns reading out a poem about unifying womanhood in this setting was especially powerful.

One of the sessions fell on International Women's Day, which provided an apt opportunity for incorporating discussion of women's rights in the classroom. As noted by Maher and Thompson Tetreault (2001), being gender-conscious in curriculum design promotes gender-consciousness in the classroom, and these women-specific aspects of the course did create a particularly cohesive atmosphere in the group early on. The Inside-Out curriculum and instructor manuals are blueprints developed in conjunction with "thinktanks", which are made up of former (predominantly male) inside and outside students and facilitators, in the spirit of knowledge co-production that underpins the programme. The curriculum blueprint does not include a focus on gender. However, this is neither prescriptive nor does it reflect the desires and ethos of the programme. In fact, in the 2013 edited collection "Turning Teaching Inside-Out", which collates various facilitators' reflections on their experiences of delivering the programme, Follett and Rodger (2013) and Heider (2018) directly advocate for the inclusion of feminism and feminist perspectives in the Inside-Out classroom. While recognising the value of this, we were at the same time conscious of the limitations of accentuating the notion of women as a homogeneous group. Indeed, the idea of a universal female standpoint has long been criticised for being a white, privileged, heterosexual, female perspective (Naffine, 1997). Difference is thus also important, stressing intersectional aspects of identity (Collins and Bilge, 2016). Intersectionality, a term first coined by Crenshaw (1989), has in recent years become a prominent concept in feminist praxis. The impact of intersecting identities, and the implication of these identities in terms of accessing power and experiencing oppression, played out in the classroom. It was evident that different identities within the all-female group shaped perspectives, especially along intersecting variables such as race and ethnicity, age, sexuality, nationality and class. Crucially, students' distinct identities, framed by their own experiences of power, privilege and oppression, shaped their reactions and interactions with both the course and their classmates. The fact that the facilitators could promote cohesion through a shared gender identity aided the group to see commonalities early on, breaking down some barriers and producing a more interconnected learning environment. So, whilst "being female" was an identity experienced by all in the classroom, and thus emphasised by facilitators as a uniting factor, easing group cohesion, other identities were much more diverse and fragmented.

**The gendered dynamics of morality: The Alligator River Story.** The consequence of an all-female classroom space manifested in different ways. It produced an environment where certain gendered comments and jokes, often based on generalisations of male behaviour, became rather commonplace. An illustration of this was during an activity near the beginning of the course, when students work in groups on a story about a woman trying to reach her boyfriend in a different part of town, known as the Alligator River Story. In the story, in order to avoid life-threatening danger (i.e. being eaten by alligators), her only option is to rely on the men around her for transport. The help offered to her does not, however, come for free, as she will only be granted passage if she pays with sexual favours. The story is about categorising behaviour and discussing different moral responsibilities in a challenging scenario. This exercise was undertaken in both the women's

and the men's prisons, with many of the students (both inside and outside) expressing a sense of moral disdain toward the main female character.

Kennedy (1993) notes that, in contrast to the traditional idea of female-to-female support, women are often tougher on other women than men, which is suggested to be linked to different (that is, higher) expectations of women in general. Connected to wider gendered norms in society, women are commonly held responsible, by both women and men, for male transgressions. In the all-female group, comments such as 'that's just what men do' were expressed in various forms, often followed by laughter. There was a level of consensus in the room that it was natural for a man to try to gain sexual (but consensual) favours out of a woman if the opportunity arose. This was clearly underpinned by heteronormative, masculinist expectations. The comments indicated a shared experience of having had men "trying it on", which, in turn, opened an opportunity for discussion in the direction of patriarchy. However, the extent to which patriarchy was naturalised was evident in the group, as many students were focused on the issue of individual choice rather than the structural conditions that contextualised such choice. Yet, the shared lived experiences of being a woman facilitated an easily accessible route towards discussions of structural oppressions through patriarchal forces, which in turn effectively reduced the divides between inside and outside students in the female prison. Moreover, this particular reading of the story was enabled through a sphere of openness about experiences of gendered harassment, which were then situated in contemporary contexts. Importantly, these experiences cut across class, race, age, and nationality. With recent campaigns having highlighted the extremely high levels of "everyday sexism" (Bates, 2015) in the UK, it is unsurprising that the women in the group expressed shared experiences of this. While these discussions brought a sense of collectiveness and shared identity, as the debate moved on, it became evident—again highlighting the limitations of collectiveness through a single, unified shared identity—that there were definite divides in the group when judging the woman's role in the story.

Female perspectives on gender roles and norms must not only be situated in wider societal contexts, but also in criminal justice specific settings. This is particularly relevant when interrogating female inside students' perspectives. For example, studies with women who have been involved in the criminal justice system demonstrate how they are commonly expected, by others but importantly also by themselves, to take on traditional caregiving roles in their families and communities (Leverentz, 2014). These roles are further reinforced by the criminal justice system itself, exemplified in how the vast majority of countries worldwide exclusively give rights to mothers to have children with them (during at least *some* periods of imprisonment); the only exception being the Nordic countries, where—aiming to address the system's re-production of gender norms—this right has been extended also to fathers (Barberet, 2014). Gender norms are thus produced and re-produced both inside and outside the system, with feminist authors arguing that the treatment of incarcerated women can be directly relatable to the level of female conformity to mythology (Kennedy, 1993). While no generalisations can be made from this small educational cohort, it is noteworthy to consider how the balance between traditional gender expectations and ideals were distributed across students, with more gender-aligned expectations about behaviours being expressed by inside students.

These viewpoints came through clearly in the discussion that followed. The story's development is key here: not having any other option, the female character decides to have sex with a man in exchange for his help, to reach her boyfriend. For this, the woman was held accountable by students, who showed rather punitive sentiment towards her compared to the men in the story, illustrated in negative comments around female promiscuity and that that was no way to "treat your man". In line with Kennedy's (1993) argument above, the point was made that the woman was the one with moral responsibility, not the individuals (i.e. the men) around her who made their help conditional on sexual favours. The inside students were more directly punitive towards the woman in the story compared to the outside students, reflecting more traditional gender ideals. Some of the outside students noted that the woman could have made a different choice, and asked why she did not find alternative means to cross the river, which elicited a facilitator-led discussion about resources and structural constraints, including how, in a patriarchal framework, a woman's main source of power/commodity if surviving independently is her sexuality (Chesney-Lind and Pasko, 2004).

As a comparison, the alligator river story was also part of the curriculum delivery at the men's prison and elicited some similar, but also in some ways more normative, student reactions. Perhaps in part due to the pervasive backdrop of hegemonic masculinity within the prison setting, some inside students felt emboldened

to express strong views on the female character's actions that were embedded in patriarchal, gender-normative scripts of the virgin/whore dichotomy and so-called slut shaming (Fanghanel and Lim, 2015; Ringrose and Renold, 2012; Armstrong et al., 2014). A key aspect of the Alligator River Story picked up by both inside and outside students involves the physical violence inflicted on the boyfriend by another man, which occurs after the boyfriend rejects the main female character upon her revealing that she engaged in transactional sex. This aspect of the story provoked outrage from some students this man had "been done wrong" and crucially, this harm had been instigated by a woman. In the story, the woman is portrayed as doubly deviant; first, she deviates from heteronormative, sexual mores, and secondly, she incites a harmful criminal act in retribution. Though she does not inflict the harm herself, in line with the idea that women maintain their passive, demure "nature" even when complicit, she supports the man who does. And yet the structural constraints and gendered portrayals were not recognised by many of the students. This was also the case in the female institution, where both inside and outside students justified their judgement of the woman as immoral by criticising her stance and her response to the violent incident (the woman is portrayed as laughing at the moment of the assault).

Later in the course the same story was revisited, this time from the perspective of victimhood. In the women's institution context, the curriculum was reviewed with the particular group formation in mind, for example by providing reading material that specifically dealt with gendered victimisation and female-focused interventions. This time, when the Alligator River Story was revisited, rather than assigning blame, students were encouraged to think about who the victims in the story were. Students accordingly began to draw more apparent links between choice and structural constraints, enabled by appraising the concept of "the ideal victim" (Christie, 1986). In this context, the female character ceased to be perceived solely as an immoral agent and was reimagined by many students as a victim of patriarchy, whose agency was constrained by the socio-economic and cultural context in which she operated. The sequence of the curriculum is likely to be of relevance here, with this session falling in the later stages of the course, when the dynamics of patriarchy had been discussed through a range of themes. From the facilitators' perspectives, it was rewarding to see students making new links between the female's structural circumstances, choices and actions.

In the male institution, where discussions of gender and patriarchy were not explicitly part of the curriculum, the revisiting of the story fostered different debates. Some students in small group discussions identified the boyfriend as the main victim. Constructing men as victims of female sexuality developed into an impassioned discussion about sexual consent, double standards, and individual agency and choice. In response, the facilitators questioned whether the same reaction would be elicited if the gender roles were reversed (but assuming the same heteronormative dynamics), in an attempt to expose the naturalised patriarchal assumptions embedded in the storyline and in many of the students' reactions. The gendering of individual choice was a dominant narrative among students for identifying the most reprehensible character in the story, while emotional and structural considerations of the characters' choices in the story represented a minority voice in the larger group discussion. In this instance, there were not clearly affiliated reactions along gender (or educational) lines between inside and outside; most students interpreted and largely accepted the story through normative patriarchal discourse.

Class, ethnicity, age, sexuality and religion might play a role in shaping judgements. The tendency to uphold heteronormative values and gendered ideals might be more prevalent in certain social and cultural groups (Jackson, 2006), while the social and cultural capital available to question heteronormative and gendered assumptions influences judgements and positions in matters of female sexuality. Indeed, we know that the positive effects of the fight for women's rights are not equally distributed across society, but rather, a "certain kind" of women—often a combination of white, straight, cis gender, middle/upper class, educated, global north—are those who have reaped most benefits of this movement (hooks, 1984; Mohanty, 1984). As an objective measure, undergraduate students' social and cultural capital is higher than people who are incarcerated. This should not, however, be taken as an automatic indication that all students hold critical views, though they are undoubtedly more likely to be presently exposed to them. Exposure to critical perspectives through involvement in education can aid students to challenge their views by providing them with tools to alter traditional narratives. Thus, it may be that plugging in reflections on gender and patriarchy throughout the course in the female institution enabled both inside and outside students to attain more critical views towards the end.

**Bringing feminist debates into the classroom: The case of prostitution** Reflecting the facilitators' expertise, as well as the curriculum development for delivery inside a women's facility, one of the weekly class topics—recognising its gendered nature (Ekberg, 2004)—related to prostitution policy. It was expected to be an intense session and it was therefore positioned late in the curriculum, to allow the group to “gel” beforehand. Additionally, the session specifically focussed on different policy approaches, to depersonalise the debate. This set-up worked well, and the debate that ensued was vivid but respectful. Reflecting the polarisation of feminist literature on prostitution (Bernstein, 1999; 2012; Ekberg, 2004; Frances and Gray, 2007), the session was set up as a two-sided debate; one representing the “Nordic model”, i.e. the criminalisation of demand while decriminalising supply, and the other the decriminalisation model, that is, decriminalising both supply and demand. Cultural affiliations and identity are relevant factors for this debate, and so is the anglo-phone societal context in which the course is situated. It is furthermore noteworthy that each side of the debate was represented by a facilitator who supported either the “Nordic/radical” or the “liberal” feminist standpoint of the argument. The session was initiated with a debate between the two facilitators, which was received with positivity from the students, who were asked to “take sides” in the debate through a physical barometer. Possibly reflecting the cultural make-up of the students, most coming from political economic contexts dominated by liberal values and ideals, most students “sided” with the liberal feminist standpoint. In individual and group reflections, students discussed their difficulties in choosing sides, stemming from the emotive nature of the issue. Among the issues cited, religion and religious affiliation appeared to conflict with underlying liberal values, rendering choice between the two standpoints more difficult. Another issue brought to the fore was that of taxation of sexual labour as clashing with a more extreme view of liberal citizenship underpinned by self-determination and minimal state intervention; all aligned with a neo-liberal state model. The groups were then given time to develop, from readings, their own arguments before another—this time student-led—debate commenced. This debate soon became rather heated, with many students being very vocal, while others choosing to stay silent.

The all-female dynamic of the group clearly came through in this session. Comments drawing on expressions such as “us women” when presenting arguments were commonplace, indicating a whole-group voice. While this did not imply agreement, it did connote a sense of collectiveness in the room. The shared identity in the room once again allowed for a more easily accessible route to gear discussions in the direction of feminist scholarship. However, the area of prostitution represents one of the most divisive areas of contemporary feminism, which again reminds us of a shared gender identity that is also intersectional. Despite the predominance of liberal values underpinning the cultural scripts of most people in the room, each student (and facilitator) came with cultural views derived from nationality, religion, ethnicity, age group, sex and sexuality, alongside personal experience and exposure to issues pertaining to prostitution/sex work. Many of the students claimed they had never thought about the issue of prostitution before, so they did not come with an existing view or alignment to a particular policy. Despite the existence and cementing of opposing positions in the room regarding policy solutions to the issue, there was agreement, as indeed there is within feminism and in the literature (Sanders, O'Neill and Pitcher, 2017; Scoular, 2015), that, whichever position on prostitution policy one endorses, prostitution remains the result of capitalist and patriarchal systems of unequal, gendered relations. This is testament to the value of gender as a unifying concept and lived condition, cutting across divisions and functioning well as an underlying theme throughout the course in this setting.

### Discussion and conclusion

This article has offered a critical reflective account of the delivery of prison-university partnerships through the lens of gender, from the authors' collective and comparative experiences and perspectives. Discussing aspects of the delivery of two courses based on the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Programme, with special focus granted to one taking place in an all-female learning space, our discussion has reflected our observations and learning journeys. Utilising a critical reflective and collaborative approach, we have offered an account of how gender has come to influence and contextualise our experiences as educators operating in controlled and gendered institutions. By applying the lens of gender to these specific teaching and learning environments, we have developed our own understanding and practice while opening scholarly discussion and inviting scrutiny.

Drawing on illustrative examples as critical incidents, we have argued that gender norms and scripts are relevant factors for the partnership-style delivery of HE in both women and men's prisons. Gender norms are suggested to be institutionally re-produced as certain forms of masculinity and femininity are expected and encouraged in carceral conditions and beyond. These in turn come to influence classroom dynamics and discussions. Classrooms, and particularly prison ones, can too easily become micro-climates of traditional gender roles reinforcement. Hence, they must be actively situated in the macro-setting of patriarchal structures. Overtly integrating discussion of gender in the prison classroom is regarded as a strategy to disrupt such traditional micro-climates.

Higher education delivery in carceral settings provides a unique experience for facilitators. The opportunity to facilitate in a team brings with it the possibility to critically and collectively reflect and acknowledge the gendered dynamics operating within the system. Although differences across intersectional aspects of identity were evident, we have suggested that working with a women-only cohort afforded the possibility to experiment with curriculum development and delivery that aimed to foster cohesion in a group that is otherwise divided across a range of factors. Making gender central to the curriculum made it possible to promote gender consciousness in the classroom. Considering positive outcomes in hindsight, clear advantages of this are noted, including that the group came to see commonalities early on. These were predominantly found in the areas of common experiences of systemic discrimination and objectification of women. While many students did not at first conceptualise these experiences in terms of patriarchal structures, the discussions that followed allowed easier access into the framing of experiences within such structural conditions. Though we can only hypothesise about this, we believe that the voicing of these types of gendered experiences are unlikely to have taken place in a mixed gender group. As has been illustrated in the comparative examples offered throughout the article, the dynamics around sexual tension and flirtation in a mixed gender group are not only time-consuming to manage for facilitators, they are also instances of the way hegemonic masculinity can come to dominate the teaching and learning context. Manifestations of this embodied some of the exact issues around patriarchy that the female-only space enabled discussion of.

Going forward, we must continue to reflect on ways in which we can work with difference, as well as similarity, to encourage students' critical understanding of other key structural categories. As mentioned, it was not intentional to solely recruit female students for this course, and thus it will be interesting to re-visit these reflections in coming years, delivering the course to more mixed groups. It is relevant to emphasise that while gender was a useful shared identity to work with, it was not a force that overpowered all other intersecting identities, and inequalities, in the classroom. For this, we need to further develop ideas and strategies to foster unity and critical thinking beyond gender as a unifying force. And yet, critical perspectives on gender should figure in the curriculum not simply as a strategy to unify, but also as a strategy to disrupt masculinist, heteronormative tropes. Thus, active and critical engagement with gender in the classroom should not be limited to all-female student cohorts.

The rewards involved in delivering these courses are especially found in the "transformations" (Mezirow, 1990) we witnessed in the classroom setting. These were seen in both the men and women's institutions. Some outside students experienced a paradigm shift, moving from an "us" and "them" mentality before the start of the course, to an understanding of the shared humanity and the importance of power and privilege in shaping access and life chances to education and/or incarceration. For some inside students, the transformation came from interacting and excelling in a HE environment, with a new keenness for learning and seeing HE as something they are both able and interested to partake in. Although these transformations are quite common in these types of partnerships (Davis and Roswell, 2013), the personal experience of facilitating a course that can, as Inside-Out Prison Exchange literature notes, break down the walls that divide us, offers an unrivalled highlight for anyone who identifies as an educator. Added to this reward are also unique lessons about how gender operates and is performed in these settings. By sharing some of our reflections, we hope to encourage dialogue on how diverse institutions and learning environments are shaped by gendered scripts and practices, and how we can respond by making them manifest.

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### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Due to factors outside of the programme's control, the total number in the end of the course had been reduced to 20.

<sup>2</sup> For more information, please visit [www.insideoutcenter.org/](http://www.insideoutcenter.org/)

<sup>3</sup> Offender Learning and Skills Service is managed by the Skills Funding Agency and acts to integrate education in the criminal justice system with mainstream academic and vocational provisions.

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**Giulia Zampini** is an early career researcher engaged in interdisciplinary scholarship on the interplay between science, politics, morality and values in drug and prostitution policy-making, which was the subject of her PhD thesis and subsequent work. Dr. Zampini is also a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at the University of Greenwich, where she has become interested in embodied critical pedagogy and prison education.

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**Camille Stengel** is an early career researcher and a Lecturer in Criminology at the University of Greenwich. She is interested in drug policy, harm reduction, and prison education. She completed her dual PhD in Cultural and Global Criminology from the University of Kent in the UK and ELTE University in Hungary in 2016. Dr. Stengel is a trained Inside-Out Prison Exchange facilitator, and has led courses in two English prisons.

**Morwenna Bennallick** is a Lecturer at the University of Westminster. She is an early career researcher currently completing her PhD at Royal Holloway, University of London where she has also co-run a Learning Together partnership with HMP Feltham. Her research explores features of learning cultures in prison. She has worked with Prisoners' Education Trust developing and managing the PUPiL network for prison university partnerships.