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# The ubiquity of gender and the hiddenness of agency: looking inside women's prisons in England

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## ABSTRACT

In the United Kingdom (UK), individuals in women's prison account for only 4% of the total prison population. Existing research stresses the detrimental consequences of institutionalisation that, in female prison spaces, seems to employ femininity as a primary mode of social control. Through document analysis, this study investigates 75 governmental and non-governmental documents related to women's prisons in England, where most UK women's prisons are located, to identify recurring themes associated with women's imprisonment. The two themes that emerged point to, on the one hand, the ubiquity of binary gender differences, through which health-care, education and vocational opportunities reproduce notions of subordinate femininity, and, on the other hand, the hiddenness of agency, as prisoners' autonomy over their body and their space is concealed by the institution to ensure their docility. Although geographically specific, the results of this study contribute to existing criminological research on women's prisons by emphasising how the institutional refeminisation and the responsabilising agenda that permeate female prison spaces normalise a unidimensional display of femininity, one that is subjugated, passive and bound to the domestic. The consequences of this can have detrimental effects not only for gender non-conforming individuals, but for all those who experience imprisonment.

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## Introduction

While the rate of women imprisoned in the United Kingdom (UK) is growing at a steady pace, the specific gendered issues affecting individuals in women's prisons have largely been ignored by penal institutions, mainly because prison, like many (if not all) institutions that constitute the Western patriarchal social world, has been designed 'for men, by men' (Priestley 2012, 69;

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Menis 2020; MoJ 2023). Evidence has demonstrated how female prison spaces can contribute to the disadvantaged position of women in society, through unfit living and working conditions and oppressive strategies of gendered regulation (Zaitzow 2004; Pemberton 2013; Moran, Pallot, and Piacentini 2009; Gottlieb and Mahabir 2022). Attempts at improving spaces in women's prisons have been slow and inconclusive, usually delayed by arguments stressing the very small numbers of women in prison, which in 2022 accounted for 4% of the total prison population in the UK (MoJ 2022).

This article presents the findings of a document analysis conducted on 75 governmental and non-governmental documents regarding women's prisons in England, with the purpose of investigating recurring themes and issues linked to the gendered nature of women's imprisonment. The choice of focusing on England and Wales's prison system stems from the higher concentration of women's prisons in England, with 12 prisons currently housing female offenders (Beard 2023). The two main themes that emerged from the analysis point to, on the one hand, the ubiquitous and unproblematic reinforcement of binary gender differences in various spheres of prison life, and, on the other hand, how agency is hidden and concealed by institutional practices that decrease individuals' control over their body and their environment. The findings of the present study, despite being geographically specific, aim to contribute to a broader conversation around the regulation of gender in spaces of confinement, that has the potential to expand beyond the context of England and Wales, and shed light on the importance of understanding the diversity of the prison population, as well as the constellation of overt and covert institutional strategies that aim at reforming imprisoned bodies into normative gendered beings (Girshick 2011; Vitulli 2013).

### *Contextualising women's prison in the United Kingdom*

Evidence shows that the female prison population is growing at a faster pace than its male counterpart: between 1992 and 2002, in England and Wales the female prison population grew by 173%, compared to 50% among incarcerated men in the same year span (Moloney, van den Bergh, and Moller 2009). In 2007, the Corston Report addressed the need for women-centred approaches and alternative sentences for women in the community, stressing how 'ignoring the gender dynamic in offending can lead to outcomes that are overly punitive for women' (Petrillo 2007, 286; Quinlan 2022). Interestingly, despite adults housed in women's prisons still representing a small portion of the overall prison population, the Ministry of Justice has predicted it to rise by a third between 2021 and 2025 (MoJ 2023). Furthermore, the increase in punitiveness has continued to target specific subgroups in society, and criminalise the most marginalised and economically disadvantaged, including people of colour, individuals with poor educational attainments, and women

with histories of abuse, who end up serving short sentences for minor offences, and with specific mental health needs that are not effectively addressed in prison (Moloney et al. 2009; MoJ 2022). Nevertheless, prison continues to be a 'men's world', organised to suit a male majority, where the pains of imprisonment are highly gendered. As we will explore in the following sections, because spaces and activities can be organised following gendered notions of femininity and masculinity, the consequences for non-male bodies can be profoundly detrimental (Moore and Scraton 2016; Crewe, Hulley, and Wright 2017; Ginneken 2016).

The principle of sex segregation in prison relies on the assumption that there are essential differences between men and women, guiding the type of punishment and rehabilitation available to offenders (Jenness and Gerlinger 2020). As Carlen and Worrall (2004) have observed, drawing from Carlen's study on women's imprisonment conducted in Scotland (Carlen 1983), gender differences in penal discipline have traditionally had different functions: while the regulation of men in the prison system may have been consistent with the need for punishment and control, 'the motto of those overseeing the imprisonment of women and girls may, arguably, have been "discipline, medicalise, domesticise, psychiatrise and infantilise"' (83). In addition, the gender essentialism in the regulation of prisoners has rendered the experiences of gender non-conforming prisoners virtually invisible and has produced a distorted vision of female prisons as more benevolent, if we can ever assume prisons to be benevolent environments, compared to their male counterpart (Gorga 2017). Instead, it appears that the regulatory framework applied to women, where rehabilitation is associated with reforming bodies to fit back into gender expectations of appropriate femininity, seems to be more punitive (Gorga 2017).

Indeed, among the gendered stereotypes that are reproduced by the prison system, the logic of 'separate sphere', that positions men in the public arena, and relegates women to the domestic, is the mechanism employed, not only to punish women more harshly for breaking traditional gender norms, but also to regulate and reform bodies in institutional settings (McCorkel 2013; Jenness and Gerlinger 2020; Davis 1998). In this way, carceral spaces tend to 'mirror the hyperexpression of traditional gender roles', by strictly categorising individuals according to the gender binary, and positioning traditional displays of femininity and masculinity as commonly desirable outcomes, through practices that range from traditionally gendered vocational opportunities to feminine body work, as we will see in the following sections (Girshick 2011, 191; Vitulli 2013). Nevertheless, while research in female prisons has focused on family unit role-play and pseudo-kinship relationships, the ways in which heterosexual and cisgender configurations have been privileged and normalised in carceral spaces requires more in-depth queer and feminist analysis (Koscheski and Hensley 2001; Hensley, Tewksbury and Koscheski 2002).

### *The queer and feminist inquiry into prison spaces*

The interrelationship of space and gender has been explored in different fields of the social sciences, including human geography and feminist and gender studies (Nelson 1999; Löw 2008; Brown and Browne 2016). Space is conceptualised as a socio-cultural and temporal construct: it is not simply where bodies are positioned in time, but it is constructed through socio-cultural values and norms, and made productive through social practices (Lefebvre and Nicholson-Smith 1991; Fu 2021). Space is engaged in a relational interaction with bodies, as it is constantly defined by the movement and practices of actors, turning social the mere geographical (Lefebvre and Nicholson-Smith 1991). Following Löw's argument on the *duality of space*, in the free world, bodies constitute spaces and, in turn, spaces inform bodies through social, cultural and legal structures (2008). The relational perspective between space and bodies presupposes a certain degree of agency which, when focusing on the carceral space, is complicated by the very nature of imprisonment, that appears as antithetical to agency and freedom (Moran, Piacentini and Pallot 2012). Thus, the carceral space represents an ecosystem detached from, yet interconnected with, the free world (Rowe 2016; Ellis 2021).

Queer and feminist geographers have attempted to de-essentialise the traditional understanding of space by uncovering how heteronormativity permeates the relation between bodies and space in Western society: rather than being authentically 'straight', space is produced and reproduced as heterosexual (Oswin 2008). Gender and sexuality are constituted in relation to each other: the ways in which actors reproduce normative notions of femininity and masculinity are intertwined with the regulation of heterosexuality, and in turn inform the space they inhabit (Jagose 2009). Butler's notion of performativity clarifies how the continuous reiteration and citation of gender norms gives away 'the illusion of their own stability', thus appearing as natural and innate (Butler 2006; Brickell 2005). In this way, heterosexuality and the gender binary are naturalised, reproduced and displayed unproblematically in the social space, defining processes of exclusion and discrimination of social actors who do not conform to heteronormativity (Hubbard 2008). Thus, the commitment of queer and feminist theory to de-essentialise hegemonic discourses allows us to think beyond the binaries of deviance and conformity, or, in Green's (2002) words, to expose 'queer cracks in the heteronormative façade' (522), as well as to understand how gender and sexuality intersect with different vectors of oppression in the broader constellation of power dynamics (Oswin 2008; Jagose 2009). This process of deconstruction of binaries is especially useful when applied to the prison space, not only because practices of sex-segregation tend to naturalise gender binaries, but also because deviations from the binaries in the carceral space tend to be disciplined more harshly (King 2013).

The queer provocation to deconstruct seemingly non-sexualised/non-gendered texts is rooted in the acknowledgement that sexuality and gender identity are social markers of existing 'regimes of the normal' (Green 2002; Valocchi 2005, 752; Jagose 2009). According to King (2013), gender, normatively coupled with biological sex, 'determines the techniques and degrees of discipline exerted on the body' (29; Moran et al. 2009). Thus, sex and gender differences have material significance, insofar as they delineate social structures that intersect with other modes of oppression and control, while also defining social processes that aim at disciplining certain bodies over others (Green 2002; King 2013; Valocchi 2005). In other words, to engage in a queer and feminist exercise of deconstruction of carceral spaces, and of the activities performed in those spaces, is to show the ways in which gender acts as a mode of discipline and regulation, influencing the routine and rehabilitation opportunities available to prisoners (Moran et al. 2009; Kruttschnitt, Gartner and Miller 2000; Liebling 2009).

Interestingly, by investigating the 'porosity' of carceral boundaries, the ways in which the prison seeps into its surroundings, queer and feminist inquiries into the prison space not only de-exorcise the lives of incarcerated individuals, showing how they are very much connected to and affected by our common social existence, but they also demonstrate how the prison aims at generating specific forms of 'female docility' (Schliehe 2016; Ellis 2021; King 2013). Foucault's work on docility and biopolitics has been revisited by feminist scholars to clarify how the carceral utilises femininity as a disciplinary power, directing bodies and minds towards ascribed characteristics associated with the feminine, including vulnerability, passivity, and dependency (Foucault 1979; Moran, Turner and Schliehe 2018; King 2013; Schliehe 2016; Romero 2014). Such unidimensional display of femininity is problematic insofar as it is internalised by prisoners: imprisonment, with its gendered discourses and regulations over what is desirable and undesirable femininity, can be conceptualised as a trans-carceral space, existing in both physical form as well as inscribed upon the body, a form of 'embodied carcerality' that will accompany individuals after release (Schliehe 2016; Moran 2014). As we will see in the following section, this understanding of carcerality as embodied, rather than simply spatial, provides valuable insights for this study, as it uncovers how prison affects bodies through the regulation of space, and of the activities performed in that space.

### *Regulating femininity in female carceral spaces*

The prison space, together with the regulation of prisoners' daily life, bodily autonomy, and mobility, are crucial to understand the gendered regulation in women's prison. Such buildings in the UK tend to be smaller in number and size, reflecting the smaller female prison population: prisoners usually have

higher chances of being housed far away from their community and support group (Zaitzow 2004; Liebling 2009). Upon entering the prison space, many female establishments have opted for pastel colours and floral decorations, as an attempt to soften the otherwise hard grey architecture of the building, and to 'normalise' the prison space: in other words, to make it feel less like a prison (Hancock and Jewkes 2011; Jewkes 2018). However, these attempts have been criticised as a way of concealing the structural issues associated with first generation prisons, where the lack of windows, access to natural light and green spaces were designed as forms of sensory deprivation, understood as an additional pain of imprisonment (Hancock and Jewkes 2011; Jewkes, Moran and Turner 2020; Sykes & Gresham 2007).

The attempt at normalising carceral spaces and making them look and feel more 'homely', which is a contemporary endeavour for prison designers, is problematic insofar as it does not recognise the diversity of gendered experiences of 'normality' or 'home' lived by incarcerated individuals, and how they intersect with other forms of structural oppression for women. For instance, most women who are caught in the criminal justice system have experienced trauma and violence in the past, usually associated with the home, and their crimes are usually bound to the domestic (Liebling 2009; Chesney-Lind 1986; Davies 2002). Furthermore, these spatial attempts connect with carceral practices of regulation and control, resonating with Angela Davis' (1998) 'domestic punishment regimes' for incarcerated women, that blur the line between public and private punishment. In other words, criminal women are assumed to violate the traditional 'woman's place' in society, and thus their punishment is not only public, but also private, relegating them to a distorted version of the home, through the questionable normalisation of prison spaces, and affirming the pervasiveness of patriarchal views on women's domesticity (Davis, 1998).

The domestication of prison life is exercised through restricted vocational opportunities available to prisoners, most of which rely on stereotypical gender expectations, including cleaning, cooking, waiting, and sewing, or on feminine body work, such as hair and beauty programmes (Young and Mattucci 2006; Medlicott 2012). While the first set of skills are an integral part of the reintegration of deviant women in the domestic sphere of society, the second resonate with King's (2013) work on female docility, that clarifies how women have historically been subjugated primarily through their bodies, demonstrating how difficult it is to 'escape the feminine' (Romero 2014). The female body becomes a microcosm of social control, diffused in the carceral space through practices aimed at regulating body autonomy and self-presentation (Foucault 1979; Caldwell 2007).

Barbara Zaitzow (2004) advances the concept of 'pastel fascism' to describe the apparently soft, yet pervasive, nature of female institutional control. Although female prisons might appear less repressive in terms of

discipline than their male counterpart, Zaitzow would argue that the means employed to ensure discipline are far more insidious and detrimental (Zaitzow 2004, 37; King 2013). This is because they are deployed as means for the 'institutional refeminisation' of women in prison who, for the sake of being both women and offenders, are destined to receive not only a legal sanction, in the form of imprisonment, but also a moral one: closed institutions assume the form of 'regimes of femininity', committed to reconstructing failing female bodies according to hegemonic and heteronormative principles of femininity (Vitulli 2013; Chesney-Lind and Pasko 2004; Pemberton 2013). Employing the concept of pastel fascism, these regimes are not overt, but rather disguised under a seemingly benevolent, yet still powerful and pervasive, frontage (Zaitzow 2004). Diffused in both the spatial organisation and the daily activities of prisoners, individual responsibility and moral improvement are fostered through domesticity and dependency: this reinventive perspective allows for a certain degree of agency in the prison space, where inmates not only internalise heteronormative structures, but also reconfigure them as the best alternative for successful rehabilitation (Zaitzow 2004; Guest and Seoighe 2020; Britton 2003; Crewe and levins 2020).

## Materials and methods

A document analysis was employed in this study to identify relevant and recurring themes, ideas and patterns related to gendered practices in women's prisons in England (Prior 2008). As an analytical method employed in qualitative research, document analysis emphasises the idea that documents are rich containers of information: it allows for a systemic review of existing sources to gain a better understanding of evidence related to a specific phenomenon, and to interpret the data in order to develop further knowledge (Bowen 2009; Corbin and Strauss 2008; Davie and Wyatt 2021). To engage in a rigorous analysis, a protocol was developed and employed, consisting of five distinct parts: definition of relevant information, definition of criteria, document selection, skimming, reading, and coding.

Firstly, after investigating the literature, I established the information to search for in the documents: gender-specific information regarding women's prisons, information about diversity and inclusion, education and vocational opportunities, and the use of personal and communal spaces. The choice of focusing on these elements derives from a review of the literature, where these issues emerged as affecting the carceral experiences of individuals in female prisons (Szuminski 2020; Zampini, Österman, Stengel and Bernallick 2019; Crewe, Warr, Bennett, and Smith 2014). However, this list was used as a guide, allowing for a degree of flexibility in highlighting relevant information in the data.

Then, three criteria were defined for the selection process, referring to content, type of document and date. To be included in the analysis, documents should have an explicit focus on women's prisons in the UK, especially on the prison system in England and Wales, where most women's prisons are concentrated. Furthermore, they should be in the form of prison reports, inspections, newsletters, and press releases coming from governmental and non-governmental agencies, as these types of documents are often public and easily accessible, increasing the validity and reliability of the findings. Lastly, they should date after 2010, a date that coincides with the Equality Act, which states the importance of addressing and safeguarding gender and sexual differences among other sources of discrimination (Hepple 2010). This date was established as an ideal starting point for the selection process, assuming that discourses around gender-specific risks and needs would be complicated by a broader understanding of gender and traditional gender roles, and because from 2010 onwards information on diversity and inclusion was being included and required in prison reports, thus allowing for the possibility of richer findings.

The process of document selection consisted of gathering downloadable online documents that matched the three criteria, that were firstly skimmed to ensure they contained the information relevant to this study. A total of 75 documents were then classified under Her Majesty Prison and Probation Services (HMPPS) and Her Majesty Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) prison reports, reports from Independent Monitoring Boards (IMB), various governmental documents, and reports and press releases from independent organisations, including Women in Prison, Prison Reform Trust, Clinks, the Howard League, Bent Bars and the Barrow Cadbury Trust. After having examined and coded the documents line-by-line until saturation, two overarching themes emerged visually, by grouping codes and linking them according to their interrelations, using a concept map generated with NVivo. A matrix coding query was helpful to explore the extent to which the themes were addressed in each classification of documents, which will be presented in the Results section.

The methodological approach employed in the generation of themes relies on the Constructivist Grounded Theory [CGT] approach, an inductive methodology that detaches itself from Glaser and Strauss' traditional Grounded Theory for its epistemological stance, addressing the socially constructed, rather than objective, nature of reality (Charmaz 2000, 521). The systemic and iterative process of CGT allows for the emergence of themes that are grounded in the data, but it also takes a feminist stance in recognising the importance of the researcher's reflexivity in selecting and interpreting the data (Charmaz 2000; Mohajan and Kumar Mohajan 2022). Indeed, the documents selected introduced the main issues detected in women's prisons, which were then interpreted and analysed based on existing prison research

studies, queer and feminist literature, as well as the researcher's interest in uncovering and questioning assumptions about gender, sexuality, and prison life, that have long been obscured in traditional criminological research. For this purpose, the researcher's positionality as a queer white woman, with no prior experience of incarceration, has been carefully considered in relation to subject of study. While there might be some resonance between the experiences of individuals incarcerated in women's prison, in terms of stereotypical and oppressive gender expectations imposed by the institution, the additional pains of imprisonment create a significant distance between the researcher and the population studied.

I am aware that a self-reflexive focus on my positionality might have its limitations, by privileging my own experiences, role, and identities, over those of the populations that have traditionally been marginalised in academic discourses, thus reproducing this form of social exclusion. However, the way in which I conciliate these perspectives is by acknowledging their distance. As argued by Nash (2016), drawing from the work of Staeheli and Lawson (1994), 'it is this space of 'betweenness' [...] that constitutes a possible site for partial and situated knowledges to be mutually constituted and produced' (134). In other words, following feminist praxis, the gap generated between my reality and the realities of the population I am researching, consisting mainly of female and gender non-conforming individuals in female prisons, should be considered a productive, rather than counterproductive, a space of radical potential, where new knowledge can emerge.

## Results

### *The ubiquity of binary gender differences*

The first theme that emerged from the visual representation of the codes refers to gender differences, and how they are unproblematically upheld and reinforced in binary terms in the prison system. Gender-specific issues are understood in relation to women's experiences of imprisonment, because they expose how a system created by men for men cannot accommodate the needs of a more diverse population. In HMIP and IMB documents, the gender and sexual diversity of the prison population is only mentioned, when available, in prisoners' survey responses, and occasionally under the 'Equality, Diversity and Faith' section, where transgender issues and the need for LGBTQ+-specific staff training is addressed. Although still playing within the gender binary, most of the data that denounced the hyper-masculinity of the prison system comes from reports from independent organisations dating 2020 to 2023, including documents from Women in Prison, the Barrow Cadbury Trust, and the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG). For instance, the 'Inquiry into women's health and well-being in prisons' from the APPG from 2022, clearly states that 'the prison system as a whole is designed

around the needs of a male majority' (1). In addition, the tone of reports produced by independent organisations that emerged from the data tended to be more denunciatory, as in the case of the Women in Prison's (2013) report 'State of the Estate', or the Prison Reform Trust's (2021) document 'Invisible Women', compared to prison reports from governmental agencies, which tended to follow the same style, format and language.

The assumption that gender differences can affect several spheres of prison life is visible when addressing issues around prison healthcare and educational and vocational opportunities in women's prisons. Out of the 75 documents, 61 mentioned the gender-specific nature of healthcare, with women's physical and mental health needs being different than men's. Interestingly, there was little information about practical applications of a gender-specific approach on physical and sexual healthcare. For instance, in none of the documents analysed the specific needs of individuals who menstruate were explicitly mentioned: only in 8 governmental documents access to sanitary products was mentioned, which could refer to sanitary pads. Furthermore, only 8 governmental documents mentioned contraception and pregnancy testing, and only 6 documents, 5 prison reports and one report from Women In Prison (2013), mentioned prevention against sexually transmitted diseases. Although pregnancy and motherhood were mentioned in prison reports from establishments with a mother and baby unit and a pregnancy board, little information was given about pregnancy termination, or how the prison is addressing the specific needs of pregnant individuals. There was little to no information regarding access to gender-affirming items or healthcare for gender non-conforming individuals in women's prisons. Most information came from a few prison reports mentioning transgender women in the establishment, and they stressed the need for a wider variety of shop items: 'while the prison had made some efforts to facilitate prisoners purchasing appropriate cosmetics, transgender prisoners told us they would have liked more toiletry and clothing options' (HMIP 2023, 40).

Instead, mental health was framed as an 'all-women' issue: almost two-thirds of all documents address the issue of trauma among the women's prison population, and the need for a trauma-informed approach when working with female offenders. This can be explained by the high rates of mental health issues, self-harm, and suicidality identified in women's prison, which are disproportionately common among female offenders, as highlighted by the MoJ's 'Female Offender Strategy Delivery Plan 2022-25' (Ministry of Justice 2023), stating that 'women in custody are particularly vulnerable, with a higher prevalence of mental health issues than male prisoners' (20). Mental health issues among female offenders appear to stem from traumatic past experiences, impacting their experience of incarceration: 'women's histories of abuse and trauma, mental illness and mothers' guilt, grief and distress at separation from their children increase their suffering' (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Women in the Penal System 2022, 3).

The educational and vocational opportunities in women's prisons tend to follow traditional gendered pathways into the labour market, and they are advertised by the prisons as suiting the needs of the population. However, it appears that 'women are sometimes given dull, basic and repetitive tasks that are logged as purposeful activity, but do not help prepare women for release' (Clinks 2020, 5). The most common opportunities include beauty therapy, hairdressing, cooking, and catering. Prison reports shed a light on the issue of time in relation to acquiring educational or professional qualifications that could be useful for reintegrating individuals on release. Being imprisoned for a short sentence does not allow (nor encourages) prisoners to engage with the opportunities offered, especially when most of the courses offer qualifications up to level 2, which coincide with secondary school qualifications. Interestingly, the HMIP report (2011) on HMP Bronzefield highlighted how 'while the average stay of prisoners was six weeks, the qualifications available at entry level 3 and level 1 were unlikely to secure employment in many cases but met the needs of most prisoners', referring to the need for purposeful activity in prison (59). Indeed, many activities in the prison establishments, including barista, gardening, and laundry, do not offer the possibility for continuation once released, raising the question of whether these qualifications and trainings reflect the working opportunities available in the free world.

Clinks' (2020) reflection on purposeful activity highlights how 'there should be a better range of opportunities for women that could include training in skills such as coding, painting and decorating, and self-employment, to help women into a wider range of employment opportunities when they leave prison' (5). These challenges are recognised in both governmental and non-governmental documents, and recent attempts to diversify prison curricula have introduced training in less traditionally female occupations, such as carpentry and warehouse storage. This is possibly in response to prisoners' requests: 'Residents have expressed a wish to see more manual subjects, such as brick laying and a DIY academy' (IMB 2020, 15; 2023a). However, these requests are dependent on the availability of specialist facilities, space and staff, as highlighted in the IMB annual report (IMB 2021) on HMP/YOI Eastwood Park: 'It would have been advantageous to offer skills/qualifications providing access to less stereotypical female careers/roles (for example, construction, engineering) but this was also prohibited by a lack of specialist accommodation, staffing and facilities' (28).

### *The hiddenness of agency*

The second theme that emerged from the analysis refers to the construct of agency, how it is concealed in prison settings, and its ramifications over various elements of institutional life. The documents touched upon the idea of agency directed both inwards and outwards: agency was understood both in

terms of bodily autonomy, thus directed towards oneself, as well as an individual's autonomy over their own environment, thus directed towards one's surroundings. In the women's prison setting, agency can be displayed through self-identification and gender expression, depending on either the material access to items for gender expression, or on rules and regulation over gender appearance, hence interconnected with issues of safety and self-preservation.

In governmental documents, the degree of access to shop items, such as male grooming products, cosmetics, toiletry, and clothing was rarely mentioned, and when it was, it was depicted as an issue presented mainly regarding the transgender prison population: 'one theme that does appear to emerge from complaints from transgender prisoners was access to, or restrictions on, make-up or clothing which would help the prisoner to live in their acquired gender (The Women and Equality Committee 2016, 66; HMIP 2022, 2023; Parole Board 2021). However, a prison report from HMP Bronzefield mentioned how some issues around gender expression in prison can affect the whole prison population, as in the case of outdated dress codes: 'the dress code was too strict and did not reflect usual standards in society, such as a rule that women could not wear skirts above the knee' (HMIP 2011, 15). This demonstrates how regulations enforced at the establishment's level around gender appearance can ultimately impact all prisoners.

Instead, documents from independent organisations focused on denouncing the overall inadequate access to the most basic items, including toilet roll, soap, and sanitary products, and the need to rely on staff to access them (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Women in the Penal System 2022). Thus, prisoners' agency over, not only their self-presentation, but also their hygiene, is conditional and mediated by prison staff. However, for transgender and gender non-conforming individuals, issues of bodily autonomy are more tightly connected to visibility and safety. Indeed, agency turned inwards was negotiated considering safety within the prison space. For visibly non-conforming prisoners, including transgender prisoners with higher risks of transphobic and homophobic attacks, the segregation unit appears to be an overused risk management strategy, ultimately denying any form of agency by locking prisoners in a cell for 23 h a day: 'the IMB raised concerns about an elderly transgender prisoner with a gender recognition certificate who was held in segregation for several weeks awaiting a national complex case board to be convened' (IMB 2023b, 17; Parole Board 2021; MoJ and HMPPS 2023).

On the other hand, agency turned outwards involved the possibility for prisoners to spatially alter or improve their surroundings: the data from IMB reports highlighted several elements demonstrating individuals' agency, or lack thereof, over the prison space. Firstly, insufficient space was highlighted in relation to small and overcrowded cells, and toilets shared with too many prisoners: the lack of personal space and privacy not only negatively affects

the degree to which prisoners can move in space, but also their overall mental health. For instance, in an IMB report (IMB 2022a) at HMP/YOI Styal, 'Toilet and bathroom facilities were limited and some houses only have two toilets for about 20 women. [...] Bedrooms are sometimes too small to hold three or four women comfortably' (7). As recognised by the inspectors, 'this lack of privacy can be detrimental to mental health and wellbeing' (IMB 2022a, 8). Secondly, prisoners have no agency over the room temperature and heating systems, a spatial feature highlighted in IMB reports: in some establishments, conditions in cells were inhumane, being extremely hot in summer and extremely cold in winter (IMB 2021). Thirdly, the structural failures and damages in several establishments, including damp, mould, and rats' infestations, not only create unwelcoming environments, but also increase feelings of helplessness in prisoners, because of the lack of agency they have over these spatial issues: 'the prison has been working on a solution to eradicate the rats, but this is proving very difficult so far. The women describe hearing these vermin throughout the night' (IMB 2022b, 15).

Lastly, graffiti on the walls of cells or units were a recurring spatial feature in the data, connected to the effects on prisoners' experience of the environment, the ability to live in a closed environment free from graffiti, or being able to repaint the walls they lived in with drawings and decorations. For instance, an IMB report (IMB 2023b) from HMP/YOI Eastwood Park, while exposing poor staff practices, mentions how 'one prisoner with severe mental health issues was put in a cell with distressing graffiti covering the walls from the previous occupier' (22). Instead, an IMB report (IMB 2022c) from HMP Send shows the impact of prisoners' agency in repainting the walls: 'art has flourished in the dining hall and elsewhere around the prison in the form of murals painted by the prisoners' (22). The ability or inability to alter one's surroundings, as well as modify the ways in which one's own body is perceived by others in space, points to the idea of agency being hidden and concealed through various institutional mechanisms, including relationship with staff, that aim at controlling prisoners and increasing their dependency on the system. Although issues around the lack of privacy, the buildings' structural failures, and the presence of graffiti might not be unique to female institutions, and might require further investigation, it is important to remember that these factors intertwine with the gendered regulation of individuals in female prisons, that affects not only their experience behind bars, but also their life outcomes after release, worsened by the additional pains of sexism and misogyny.

## Discussion and conclusion

The two themes that emerged from the document analysis give us a valuable insight into the current regulatory environment in women's prisons in

England. The contrast between ubiquity and hiddenness in naming the themes purposefully evokes the spatiality of such practices, rooted in how bodies are regulated in space. What is undoubtedly absent in the investigated documents is an attempt to recognise the diversity in the prison population, in terms of gender, sexual, ethnic, but also social and cultural diversity, and their consequent intersections. This is visible from the 'one size fits all' approach that has been applied to female prison establishments, where similar problematics arise because of an apparent indifference and ignorance of diversity. The missed opportunities at improving the situation behind bars are visible in how the same issues would reappear year after year in the same establishments, as denounced in IMB and HMIP reports. This is not to say that similar issues, such as lack of appropriate physical and mental health care, are unique to women's prisons and are not experienced in the male estate. Rather, as clarified through the themes, these issues are employed as tools through which the prison further regulates individuals in the female estate, by indirectly reproducing notions of specific forms of appropriate femininity.

The emphasis on gender differences between men and women, ubiquitous in arguments around healthcare and vocational opportunities, supports Moore and Scraton's (2016) assumption that the goals of rehabilitation, preached by the criminal justice system through incarceration, are not gender neutral, but they rely firmly on a heteronormative and patriarchal vision of gender as binary. What emerged from the data clarifies what Zaitzow (2004) defines as pastel fascism in women's prisons, or the seemingly benevolent façade of the system that hides pervasive forms of social control. Indeed, the gender-specific approach to healthcare in prison fails to address the main issues that affect individuals with a uterus, such as menstruation, individuals who engage in heterosexual intercourse, such as contraception and STI testing, as well as individuals that share both, who can then become pregnant. Such pitfalls demonstrate that non-male bodies are virtually invisible in prison medical discourses and services, while also denying various forms of sexual and reproductive healthcare in women's prisons. This outlook on prisoners' sexual activities, or lack thereof, is an example of several covert and pervasive ways in which the prison system regulates imprisoned bodies, as well as promoting notions of chaste femininity.

Similarly, the lack of diversity in the vocational and educational opportunities available in women's prisons could be conceptualised as an additional mode of regulation (Young and Mattucci 2006). By doing so, not only is the prison system steering prisoners towards traditionally feminine occupations, and engaging in the domestication of prison life, but it also promotes the process of institutional refeminisation, despite contemporary attempts to access more diverse occupations and curricula (Moran et al. 2009; King 2013). Here, it is crucial to stress that there seems to be a unidimensional

understanding of femininity and womanhood within the prison rhetoric, one that is connected to subordination, passivity, and dependency: the lack of access to appropriate education and diverse vocational opportunities denies autonomy and contributes to economically and socially disadvantaging individuals after prison.

Interestingly, the literature highlights how the experience of imprisonment is associated with notions of self-improvement and personal reinvention that emanate from the institution's ideology (Crewe and levins 2020). What emerges from the themes is how the responsabilising agenda towards women's empowerment, rooted in the vision of prisoners as agentic beings, is in stark contrast with the ways in which the prison system rewards expressions of subordinate femininity, under false pretences of improving their future life outcomes (Guest and Seoighe 2020). Here defining agency as hidden and concealed, rather than either present or absent, might help to further understand the experience of imprisonment, where notions of subjugated femininity not only emanate from the rules and regulations of the institution, but they also permeate space, bodies, and relationships, thus becoming disciplinary power (Moran et al. 2009; Crewe and levins 2020; Foucault 1979). Agency is purposefully concealed in the prison space, in how gender expressions are monitored, alternative gender configurations denied, and in the ways in which prisoners have the ability, or inability, to alter and improve their surroundings.

To consider agency as two-folded, as directed both inwards, towards one's body, as well as outwards, towards one's surroundings, helps recognising not only how carcerality can affect one's sense of self in relation to the space they inhabit, but how it can also disempower individuals, raising questions around its long-term impact after release. Thus, in women's prison spaces, female docility is achieved not only through the subjugation of bodies, but also by disavowing possibilities of autonomy over the space prisoners inhabit, both of which can create an environment that is trauma-inducing (Schlosser 2013; Foucault 1979; King 2013). This is not to say that prisoners do not engage in practices that contest or challenge the system, as Guest and Seoighe demonstrate by considering visual imprints as tactics to regain some form of control over the prison space (2020). However, what emerged from the themes is that the strategies through which the institution conceals bodily autonomy and spatial agency are bounded to, and help reproducing, notions of subjugated femininity: to discipline forms of resistance means to discipline deviations from this specific form of social control. This finding resonates with Davis' reflection on the phenomenon of women's imprisonment: the lines between public and private punishment are blurred, specifically because discipline in women's prisons is indivisible from the reproduction of subjugated femininity (1998).

Overall, the findings of this document analysis, although limited and specific to the penal context of England and Wales, contribute to existing

knowledge by providing further insights into the experience of incarceration in women's prisons, which is necessary at a time when the British government predicts a future sharp increase in the rate of imprisonment. Nevertheless, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the gendered regulation of women's prison spaces, this document analysis has the potential to be triangulated with findings from other research studies (Bowen 2009). A mixed-method approach can shed a light on the lived experience of individuals in female prisons, especially individuals who do not conform to femininity and womanhood, as well as individuals who engage in practices of resistance and subversion of subjugated femininity.

Nevertheless, the two themes from this document analysis provide some valuable insights for contemporary criminological research on female prison spaces, by referring to, on the one hand, the ubiquity of binary gender differences in various spheres of prison life, and, on the other hand, the hiddenness of agency, directed both towards imprisoned bodies and the space they inhabit. These findings complement existing literature, suggesting that gender is a central form of social control in the prison space, reproducing traditional norms associated with masculinity and femininity (King 2013; Gorga 2017; Zaitzow 2004). However, when focusing on women's prisons, two considerations derive from the present study: firstly, the configuration of femininity that is privileged and rewarded is one that is subjugated and domestic; secondly, alternative gender identifications are either dismissed or disciplined. Furthermore, the data clarified that the responsabilising agenda in female prison spaces diverges from the ways in which the institution conceals forms of agency and empowerment for prisoners.

Ultimately, the processes of institutional refeminisation not only encourage specific displays of subjugated femininity, but they also instil in prisoners a sense of passivity towards both oneself and the space they inhabit, with possible detrimental consequences for their mental health and future life outcomes. Exploring such processes, especially in carceral contexts beyond England and Wales, has the potential to unveil the broader strategies of social control employed in women's prisons. At the same time, employing a queer and feminist approach can help disrupt and contest heteronormative practices of gender regulation, while providing a comprehensive critique of the prison industrial complex, driven by the necessity to decrease the prison population and provide valuable alternatives to custodial sentences.

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