

Introduction

As #MeToo exploded across the internet in the autumn of 2017, the world appeared to briefly wake up to the prolific nature of sexual violence. And with this newfound awareness came an urgent demand for – largely carceral – consequences; a call which found its footing most vehemently within [mainstream feminism](#).

For instance, following the news that former-US Olympic gymnastics team doctor Larry Nassar had been issued a 175-year sentence a sense of feminist triumph swept the internet, reaching a fever pitch after [Judge Rosemarie Aquilina](#)'s closing remarks went viral. After France began to plan for [anti-street harassment laws](#), which came into law in August 2018 nicknamed the '[outrages sexistes](#)' law, British MP Stella Creasey and feminist influencer Gina Martin called for a similar law to be brought into the UK. The purpose being to tell those who perpetrate street harassment – and in particular upskirting - that '[their behaviour is unacceptable](#)' through sentences of up to two years in prison. And in the months that ensued following Judge Persky's handing Brock Turner a six month sentence after abusing the woman we now know of as [Chanel Miller](#), feminists from across the globe protested and signed petitions to first have the sentence increased, and then either recall or impeach Perksy.

While this type of feminism was – remains, and has long been– pervasive, in the aftermath of MeToo it was also increasingly accompanied by a warning that has only grown in volume since: [that feminists must avoid "carceral feminism"](#). Prior to 2017 the term “carceral feminism” was largely restricted to academic discussions of feminism. However, in 2018 it was the concept's seemingly clear typology of a certain kind of feminism, and the risks of this approach, that caused it to catch on quickly. Nonetheless it's important to interrogate whether there are any consequences to this mainstreaming, and whether so-called “carceral feminists” are perhaps more complicated than is so often assumed.

When I say “carceral feminist” you say...

To begin with it's worth spending a little more time unpacking what popular conceptions of carceral feminism are. Coined in [2007 by American sociologist Elizabeth Bernstein](#) the term originally arose from Bernstein's attendance of over a decade of both evangelical Christian and secular feminist anti-trafficking - or [sex work abolitionist](#) – meetings. Through this ethnographic work [Bernstein contended](#) a new feminism was becoming increasingly evident, one was characterised by:

a shared 'commitment...to a law and order agenda...a drift from the welfare state to the carceral state as the enforcement apparatus for feminist goals...to carceral paradigms of social, ... and to militarised humanitarianism as the pre-eminent mode of engagement by the state'.

In this way, central to Bernstein's “carceral feminism” is not only a commitment to carceral paradigms, but also a belief that they can save trafficked women.

As interest in anti-carceral perspectives have accelerated in recent years, so too has attention in carceral feminism. Although closely connected to Bernstein's typology, “carceral feminism” has since expanded to include feminist policy interventions that are committed to – and appear to believe in – [a carceral agenda](#)'. While technically carceral feminism can arise anywhere, the focus of critiques are frequently wedded to what [Leah Cowan](#) refers to as ‘the carceral feminist

triad of rape, child abuse and murder'. Which as Cowan points to is perhaps due to the fear and pain that surround these acts. In this way carceral feminism has come to be understood as a powerful, dominating, feminist politics that enacts '[monumental changes](#)' due to an [uncritical reliance on policing, prosecution, and imprisonment to resolve gendered or sexual violence](#)', and a belief that '[increased policing, prosecution, and imprisonment \[are\] the primary solution to violence against women](#)'. Notably there is some disagreement about carceral feminism's origins, with some claiming this politics arose from a certain type of feminism's [desire for power](#) and others suggest that feminism unintentionally acted as a '[partner in the unforeseen growth of a criminalised society](#)'. Nonetheless, again akin to Bernstein, the overriding consensus is that carceral feminism continues to find relented purchase in the hearts and minds of feminists due to a neoliberal desire to protect wounded individual female survivors from bad and violent male perpetrators who deserve to be punished for what they have done.

As "carceral feminism" has become ever more distilled, rigidly individualised ideas around what – and who – the "carceral feminist" is have also emerged. A process which has been accelerated with the growing interest in anti-carceral perspectives following calls to defund the police in 2020 in the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter protests. Across both popular culture, social media and academic writing the carceral *feminist* is now frequently characterised as: [essentialising](#), [insidiously powerful](#), [white and middle-class](#), [transphobic](#), [pro-conservatist notions of the state](#), and in possession of – what Janet Halley refers to in her discussions of "[governance feminism](#)" as – a [traumatised sensibility](#). There are of course some feminists who support and celebrate carceral approaches, and who embody all of these traits. However, there are also a vast swathe of others who perhaps tentatively support carceral consequences, who believe that sometimes incarceration and punishment are of use, who do not.

In her detailed analysis of carceral feminism, [Anna Terweil](#) has issued a challenge to both the simplification and individualisation of feminism, noting: "carceral feminism" is a complex object of critique. Not only are there no self-described carceral feminists, the term itself points in multiple directions'. It is pertinent then that – turning to the UK – many of those who have expressed support for seemingly carceral feminist policies and approaches - such as '[make misogyny a hate crime](#)' or celebrating the incarceration of those who cause sexual violence - [challenge](#) or [reject](#) the label of "carceral feminist". As Terweil goes on to unpack, carceral feminism is complex. Not only this but so too is a feminism that rejects carcerality, but the suggestion of a binary choice – carceral vs anti-carceral – 'suggests far greater unity among its critics, and clarity about what distinguishes them from their carceral counterparts, than it ultimately delivers'. And the implications of this are essential to sit with.

Feminism's Emotional Entanglement with Carcerality

Extending Terweil's argument, I suggest that rigid ideas of carceral feminism, and individualised notions of "the carceral feminist" risk producing a binary that obscures, the complexities of how carcerality shows up in feminism. More specifically that this invisibilises the emotional forces the pull feminism and feminists back to a system that they in fact widely acknowledge as irreparable and deeply violent. Indeed, I would propose that homogenous and fixed understandings of carcerality, and in turn carceral feminism, prevent a reckoning with the contradictory, tension-laden, ways that carceral – and perhaps also anti-carceral and abolitionist – logics shows up for feminists whenever they encounter Cowan's 'carceral feminist triad'.

A look to my own experiences as a frontline sexual violence support worker are a useful example here. While sexual violence services are [often depicted](#) as one of the homes of carceral

feminism, in actuality a vast majority of those who work in the gender-based violence sector start their work from a serious engagement with the idea that there are problems in both criminal justice responses to sexual violence, and in doing so they frequently attempt to move beyond these systems or solve the problems they cause. As such, many current or former workers would gawp at being labelled a carceral feminist, myself included. Throughout my ten years in services I was firmly anti-police, didn't see punishment as the solution to violence, and rationally knew that locking those who commit sexual violence away in prison was not only rare but also ineffectively harmful for it didn't prevent sexual abuse, didn't provide anyone with justice and only bred more violence. In spite of these firm beliefs, whenever a case was passed to the lawyers at the Crown Prosecution Services, whenever there was a charging decision, or whenever a case was found guilty at court myself and my colleagues would feel a fleeting moment of celebration. While telling myself this elation was because this decision meant that a survivor had finally been believed, and that was so rare, a part of me also hungered after something that felt punishment and punitivity, but also wasn't quite either of these things. While calling for abolition on the streets, demanding an end to policies that only increase the size and scale of the criminal justice system, and telling others that those who cause sexual violence are not monsters, I was also deeply and emotionally invested in the idea that they were. I consequently longed for some kind of incapacitation of those who cause untold harm and injustice, a complex, complicated and contradictory sensation that I am [far from alone](#) in experiencing.

In spite of being able to reflect upon this now, and both trace and challenge these emotional investments, while working as a frontline worker this was near impossible. This was partially due to my own deep rooted carceral investments, which were accentuated by doing support work day in and day out, but also that neoliberal funding models and a culture of urgency have stripped out the space for generative thinking. While I do not wish to suggest that binary understandings of carceral feminism are the root of the problem, I do believe that I – like many others – are unable to see the ways we are complicit in, whilst also deeply attached to, carcerality because of the ways in which it, and thus carceral feminism, is so frequently framed and characterised.

Reframing – and Problematising – Carceral Feminism

Abolitionist feminism has long sought to highlight that carcerality does not simply live in laws and policies, much like it is not solely something that is imposed on us. In her personal account of how the pains of navigating her desire for vigilante justice alongside her understanding that it was [transformative justice](#) which would instead give her the justice she sought, [Lena Palacios](#) makes the point that it is important to 'reassess facile, axiomatic assumptions that posit us [feminists] merely as vulnerable victims—and not agents—of gendered, racialized, and carceral state violence'. Here Palacios suggests, drawing on [Ruthie Wilson Gilmore](#), that the hunger for punishment, the desire to hurt, is not located in a prison-like 'building "over there" but [in] a set of relationships that undermine rather than stabilize everyday lives everywhere'. As the age old abolitionist adage goes: [the cops are not only on the streets, they are also in our head, our hearts](#) and also [our imaginations](#).

Understanding carcerality in this way, as something that exists in laws and policy, all the while being relational and deeply affective, highlights just how difficult carceral feminism is to reckon with. Nonetheless, it also offers a pathway to think differently about the – often emotional – hold that punishment has upon so many of us. For if having moments where we

feel the carceral feminist pull – the deep desire for punishment or vigilantism – does not make us bad carceral feminists, but instead makes us feminists who know and experience the awfulness and injustice of gender-based violence then perhaps we can instead acknowledge those feelings, without leaning into them. We can perhaps understand that, as Gilmore points to, these feelings are real but won't bring about the change that is so desperately desired. In this way, rather than seeing carceral feminism as a feminism that always believes in punitivity, and that supports punishment uncritically, we should instead understand it as a broad and affective politics that many of us experience (at possibly multiple points a day). A politics that has many tangible policy outcomes, whilst also being one which we often feel deeply, and can thus sit with, pin-point, name, and in turn grapple with rather than give into or ignore.

Towards the end of her essay Terweil calls for an initiative of problematisation, a process which 'illuminate(s) the logics that channel our thinking in order to unsettle them' and 'actively embraces the discomfort, disorientation, and unsettlement that accompany such radical thinking' and which she argues is helpful in the move towards abolition. Thinking with Terweil once again, perhaps rather than judge feminist practices as "carceral" based on their degree of separation from state institutions, systems that punish and the law we might instead ask whether they may also help us to rethink feminism's attachments to punishment and justice in their gendered and racialised complexity. Indeed, it is important to think through the valuable lessons that can be learnt from speaking to and learning with others who are also trying to end gender-based violence and have been doing so for decades; such as those who work in feminist sexual violence support service. Workers who are often funded by the carceral state but who navigate tensions around their distrust in carceral systems day in and day out, and who both occasionally long for the incarceration of those who cause sexual abuse while also finding other avenues to meet the needs of those they support. A process which I believe may move us away from reforms which make the criminal legal system bigger, towards those that use creative approaches to call for consequences rather than punishment and different types of [informal justices](#), that [although may at times seem carceral](#), in fact ultimately [make this same system smaller](#).

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