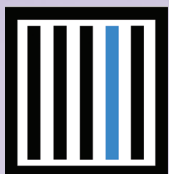


# Women in German Prisons



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**AÇIK  
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## **Women in German Prisons**

The following paper will focus on the current situation of female prisoners in Germany. First, a general introduction will be given. Afterwards, it will address the living conditions of imprisoned women, about their health problems, (drug) addictions and about governmental programs specially originated for female prisoners. In the end, it will be discussed what is good about Germany panel system and where there are still improvements to make.

Statistics of the German Federal Agency ascertained on 31st of May 2015 that 3105 women were imprisoned, which makes 4% of the total amount of prisoners in Germany. The average age of female prisoners is 33 years.

Current law claims that women and men must be accommodated separated from each other – but since there are not that many female prisons in Germany, it is hard to ensure this law. Mostly, female prisoners are accommodated in separate buildings of the male prison. Moreover, law claims that it is not allowed to let female prisoners being alone with male staff to avoid abuse.

Nevertheless, there are only 45 prisons in Germany where women are accommodated – only six of them are especially and only for female prisoners. These are the following: JVA (JVA =prison) Schwäbisch Gmünd, JVA Aichach, JVA for women Berlin, JVA Frankfurt am Main III, JVA for women Vechta and JVA Willich II. As a result, only 47,4% of the female prisoners are accommodated in special woman's prisons. Many problems are connected to the deficiency of female prisons:

Furthermore, most of them live far away from their families. They do not see their partners, children or other close friends and family members regularly (Often, relatives do not have enough money for the ride to the prison where the woman is accommodated). It is difficult to keep up important relationships, especially when the woman have long imprisonments. Therefore, it is not unusual that social relationships collapse and the women do not have a support system rescuing them when they leave the prison (Funk 2009: 50).

Many women are sentenced of a crime, committed together with a man they are close to. Sometimes, when they are in an emotional relationship, the women do shoulder the blame on them to exonerate the man when it comes to conviction.

As stated before, many women are accommodated in separate buildings of the men's prisons. This is problematic because even though women regularly commit less heavy crimes they are mostly exposed to security precautions with the men (in 2015: 875 women were imprisoned because of theft, 784 because of fraud, 416 because of drug abuse/smuggling and only 254 women committed violence crimes). A factor which exacerbates the imprisonment for women. Another problem that arises is that the given situation makes it hard to provide a

specific social service fitting for the needs of the female prisoners. This can not only cause a higher risk of relapse when it comes to drug addiction.

Moreover, many prisons which are aligned for men originally, develop a treatment schedule only for those prisoners who are imprisoned for more than one year – unfortunately most women stay less than this period of time so they do not get the chance to participate in rehabilitation programs provided by the prison (in 2015: less than nine months: 1502 women; two to five years: 712 women; five to fifteen years: 498 women; lifelong: 148 women). In 2007 55,4% of female prisoners did not had the chance to participate in such a program – those female prisoners where in prison just to serve their punishment which does not fit the assumption of the prison being a place for rehabilitation. Those female prisoners did not get the chance to evaluate their life decisions constructively and they did not learn anything about alternative life structuring measures (Funk 2009: 51).

Another problem women have to face is that they do not have good education and/or working opportunities, especially when they are accommodated in separate buildings of smaller men's prisons. As a result, they do not have the chance to save any money and some of them even incur debts while their imprisonment. For example, do the women in the prison in Vechta only have the opportunity to be trained to become cooks. The problem is that they generally do not have the chance to fulfil a job training because their imprisonment period is too short. Some prisons try to counteract this problem by providing at least some basic classes in certain professions (computer courses or an introduction to painting as a profession) so that the women get an idea about different job opportunities (Funke 2009: 53).

Anyway, scholars claim that it would be better for female prisoners to stay in open prisons, because mostly, as stated before, they did not commit heavy crimes and rarely use holidays or free time for fleeing the prison or committing other crimes. Moreover, open prisons would make it easier for the women to keep in touch with their family members and friends and they would have better opportunities for job offerings (Funke 2009: 52).

In the following abstract, I will illustrate which difficulties many female prisoners had/have to face, in their past, during their stay in the prison and after the imprisonment.

Researchers found out that women do suffer more from being separated from their families, especially from their children, than men do. Moreover, they get stigmatized more often by their families and relatives because, as a criminal, they not fit the 'classic female role model'. So, when they leave the prison after their imprisonment they may face a lack of social relationships.

Many women experienced (sexual) violence in their past, so they react to male prison staff more sensitive. In custody they therefore, react with adaption, passivity, resignation and/or depression. The help offered by the prison should focus on these facts and provide special coping strategies. The autonomy and self-responsibility of the women should be encouraged.

In most prisons, these programs are not provided (Funk 2009: 54). In many institutions, there is not just a lack of qualified staff but a lack of staff in general.

The women experienced (sexual) violence through a violently father and/or mother or saw their mothers/fathers suffering. Approximately 50 to 75% of the imprisoned women experienced sexual abuse in their past. Therefore, the self-concept of many female prisoners is shaped by a traditional image of women and a strong dependence on men. Different than most men, women often do turn their aggression and frustrations against themselves and blame themselves when they failed at some point in their lives. An imprisonment is a very stressful situation which can even strengthen such emotions leading to psychological complains like depressions (Schröttle et al. 2004: 5).

It is supposed that conflictual relationships and a violent biography have a massive impact on the women. Mostly, there is a lack of stable relationships – 65% of the women had a relationship while imprisonment (Schröttle 2004: 26).

In the following abstract, I will explicitly focus on sexual abuse and other negative experiences the women made.

A survey, conducted by the German Federal Ministry, interviewed 88 female prisoners among others, like prison staff and the prison administration. The results will be shown in the following.

While the women are imprisoned they do experience physical violence not only through the staff but also through other prisoners. Mental violence is expressed with envy, resentments, rivalry or intrigues. The interviewed women experienced different kinds of violence: 92% experienced sexual harassment, 89% mental violence, 91% physical violence and 57% sexual violence. As compared with the average of female population in Germany they experience physical violence three times more often and sexual violence even four to five times more often. Even 39% of interviewed female prisoners admitted being raped. While imprisoned 36% experienced physical and 5% sexual abuses (Schröttle 2004: 36). 82% admitted being injured/threatened by other prisoners and 22% experienced this through the prison staff.

The survey reveals that 45% of the prisoners have problems with their health. A majority complains about headaches, stomach-aches, backaches and also eating disorders, disorders concerning the stomach and the intestine. Moreover, they feel feeble, numb, have alopecia or vision disorders. This leads to psychosomatic coherence (Schröttle 2004: 43). It is expected that a big amount of the health problems can be associated with drug abuse and other addiction issues. A majority of the women show symptoms of stress and overload. Every fifth woman had panic attacks and anxiety states in the last 12 months, every seventh woman is suffering from depressions and suicidal ideation (Schröttle 2004: 46).

The survey found out that about 51% of the female prisoners show at least one form of addiction (just like drugs, medication and/or alcohol). Every fourth woman participated in

special rehabilitation programs offered by the prison. This contains training measures, social training, drug and addiction prevention, sports programs and recreation courses. Later, a few such programs will be presented more detailed.

When the scholars asked the staff if there were any women who disturbed the process of the imprisonment in any way the interviewed persons said, that 82,5% of the women do not disturb the daily life in prison. Only 5,7% committed a crime while being imprisoned and another 0,4% tried to escape prison (Prätor 2013: 27). Other researches claim that the staff estimates that 16,1% to 28,2% of the female prisoners are not predestined to commit another crime. 29,2% are believed to be endangered a little and every fourth female prisoner is believed to be highly endangered (Prätor 2013: 33).

Furthermore, the survey found out that 25% of the imprisoned women do have a graduation or a completed apprenticeship, 6% do not have finished their apprenticeship yet, 28% finished their main school, 31% finished middle school and 5% finished their A levels/secondary school. Most of the women did not have a job before they were imprisoned. Moreover, they had difficulties with their living situation. 18% did not constantly live in a private home but were homeless (11%) or lived in a care home.

Many women have been unemployed before they were imprisoned, and many are addicted to drugs, alcohol or medications.

One of the biggest problems the prisoners have to face is finding a job after their imprisonment. Only every fifth woman, will have a job afterwards – mostly under precarious conditions (Prätor 2013: 2). The survey claims that those women who have been convicted previously have a higher risk to be convicted again (Prätor 2013: 6). And those women who committed a violence crime do not get convicted again in most cases.

Most of the children are staying at a care home or adoptive parents while their mothers are imprisoned. Others stay with their grandparents or fathers – only 7,5% children stay with their mothers in prison – this number is such low because there are not that many mother-child institutions and the requirements are very high (Prätor 2013: 21).

Moreover, European law states that it is necessary to provide special health care for pregnant women. They should not be imprisoned when it is not absolutely necessary and it should be provided for them to go to a regular hospital for medical treatments and birth giving. It has to be impeded that a prison as the birthplace is identifiable to avoid stigmatization. 37,3% of the children are accommodated at the fathers' place while the mother is imprisoned, 32,2% stay with their grandparents, 1,7% with other relatives, 16,9% live with adoptive parents or in foster homes and 6,8% are accommodated different.

45% of the women will live in a private flat after their imprisonment, 16,8% will move to their partners, 15% will live with their parents and another 0,7% have to go to forensic commitment after prison (Prätor 2003: 32). After discharging it is very important for the women to have a stable support system of friends and/or family members. If the women do not have

such a support system it can help if they cooperate with therapeutic or social institutions to fulfil a rehabilitation back in society easier.

After describing the problems female prisoners have to face I will introduce some special programs offered by German Government to support imprisoned women in different ways.

First, I will introduce the prison for women in Vechta. The prison has space for 183 female prisoners and is specialized in working with drug-addicted women, the prison has a special program for these prisoners. During the first two weeks, the women reserve a course in which they learn everything about consulting and treating programs the prison is offering. As one can assume that today 50 to 80% of the imprisoned women in Germany are drug addicted (in 1987 only 18% were drug-addicted) there is a special need in giving these women the opportunity for rehabilitation programs. The consulting program contains therapeutic treatment, education about infectious diseases and general help in life crises. A very special program is a project in which the females can swap their old syringes in the prison to avoid spreading diseases. The prison administration sees a special need in conceptualizing a specific rehabilitation program fitted for female needs. Moreover, the prison provides a therapeutic program apart from the prison for women who committed murder (either they murdered their partners or their children) and for those who committed sexual crimes. This institution has space for eleven women and the regular treatment takes three to four years, sometimes even longer.

The prison for women in Aichach has a special program for female prisoners, as well. The project is called 'Frei-Raum' (freedom) and provides a therapeutic treatment away from the actual prison cells. Female prisoners get the chance to learn how to become more self-confident and how to structure a life without committing crimes – this program is voluntary. It is supposed that most of the imprisoned women have a past influenced by violence and repression. Therefore, it is necessary to offer these women strategies to structure their life differently after they leave the prison – the crimes they committed can be interpreted as an appeal of help. Moreover, the therapists state, that most convicted women do not have learned to structure their life actively or to make decisions for their own goods. The program, which is set up like a little camp in the forest, gives them the opportunity to reconsider their life and shows them that and how they can live an autonomous and independent life. They should learn certain skills of self-defence and how to say 'no' without being violent. The camp is not just about therapeutic treatments in the classical way but also tries to create a safe and uplifting atmosphere for example by arranging bonfires at night – finally, the women should try to help each other by sharing personal experiences.

In Görlitz there is another project for offenders, especially working with female perpetrators of domestic violence. Even though it is mostly men abusing their wife and/or children, there are women too, acting as the perpetrator. For these women, there are only a few programs as this phenomenon can still be seen as a taboo in society – it is general consensus that mothers are always the loving one and anyhow rather victims of domestic violence. In the program, the women should learn how they can cope with their violent emotions, they develop

behaviour patterns of a violent free acting and they should develop some kind of empathy for the victims.

In most cases, because there are not that many women who use this training, group sessions do not come about. That is why there are individual training programs for just one person. One therapy method is called slow motion in which the woman has to describe a random situation very detailed in which she used violence. During this process, the woman should realize why she reacted in a certain way and what makes her act like she does. Moreover, communication training has a very important role.

The prison in Cologne is one for men, women and adolescent. It, too has a special program for women, to be precise pregnant women. It offers space for 300 women in the closed prison and 37 spaces in the open prison. The general opinion is, that pregnant women are faced with special problems. Many of them doubt their motherhood and are in a very ambivalent stage if and how they can bear the imprisonment while being pregnant. Therefore, they need special support. The support program of the prison in Cologne requires to build up a trustful relationship to the pregnant woman, they organize medical inspections, necessary preparations for the childbirth and create a support system before, while and after the birth. Moreover, they organize accommodation for the child, accompany meetings with the partner/father of the child and help setting up all necessities for a life after the mother's imprisonment. Moreover, the organization educates the women about health and show them perspectives and opportunities for further life goals. In case the women put up their baby for adoption the organization supports the women during this process as it can be very emotional for the female prisoners. The organization itself is run by both, volunteers and social workers, it gets financial support by the catholic church.

German law provides a special law for mothers. Thanks to this special law, it is possible for mothers of children which are younger than six years (in open prison) and not older than three years (in closed prison) – even though the different federal states do have slightly different provisions here –, to be together in special mother-child-institutions, if the court agrees with it, too.

Previously, it has to be ensured that being in special mother-child-institutions will not carry away any disadvantages for the aspects of child. With this program, it is tried to avoid that the child develops damages in its socialization while being separated from the mother. Especially when there is no other opportunity for accommodation it can be better for the children to stay with the women in prison. Moreover, surveys found out, that it has a positive impact on the female prisoners as well. Nevertheless, there is still a lot to do because there are only seven such institutions in whole Germany even though the achievements of this systems are significant.

In Görlitz there is another program for female perpetrators of domestic violence.


In Sachsen (state in eastern Germany) the police statistics registered 2.146 perpetrators of domestic violence in 2011, 360 of them were female which makes an amount of 16,8%.

Mostly, the victims are husbands (259 cases), daughters (42 cases), sons (36 cases) and daughters abusing their parents (33 cases). The consequences are mostly not too serious, only a few assaults need a treatment in the hospital. Aim of the courses should be to teach the (young) women (courses are for women who are 18 years and older) alternative strategies in expressing their feelings and emotions and a way in discourse constructively with family members. The program in Görlitz is not working with women who are suffering from drug abuse, who have other psychological afflictions or a lack of sangfroid.

To sum up, it can be seen that German penal system knows about the special needs of female prisoners. There are many programs focusing on their special needs and many scholars point out the difficult situation these women are in, which decisions they have to face and which health problems they carry. Anyway, there are not enough prisons just for female prisoners and there are not enough mother-child-institutions. For the future, the government has to enlarge this sector immensely by offering better education programs and job opportunities for these women. An imprisonment which is conceived especially for female prisoners should concentrate on the following: gender sensitivity, an environment based on safety, the concepts of dignity and respect, the support of relationships to children and significant others, the prohibition of services and supervision and a sensitive dealing with trauma and mental health issues, as women have significant problems concerning these factors. If German penal system wants to encourage women to not commit crimes again it has to provide a humanly penal system not just punishing offenders but seeing the difficult circumstances leading a person to commit a crime. By reintegrating the women in society, by offering them education and job opportunities by ensuring individual programs it can be made sure that the females do get the chance to live a life without crime.

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