



## Précis Paper

### Women in the Criminal Justice System

This ten minute discussion with British Labour politician and Member of the House of Lords Jean Corston is, for me, a landmark discussion. Everyone who watches will be enriched. It is about prisons. Not only does Jean discuss women and prisons but also men and prisons.

#### **Discussion Includes**

- Baroness Corston's history of advocacy for imprisoned women
- The effect of Baroness Corston's seminal 2007 report
- Prisons are male institutions
- The characteristics of female prisoners that make them different from male prisoners
- Changes in female incarceration

## Précis Paper

### Women in the Criminal Justice System

1. In this edition of BenchTV, the Right Honourable Baroness Corston (Member of the House of Lords) and Ian Benson (Solicitor) discuss issues arising from female incarceration.
2. Baroness Corston's activism in relation to female incarceration began shortly after visiting a women's prison in London as a member of the House of Commons. She noted that the majority of women in prison were there for social nuisance offences, which did not seem to demand what is the most supreme form of punishment in the UK and Australia.

#### The Corston Report

3. In 2007, Baroness Corston compiled a Home Office report entitled '[A Report by Baroness Jean Corston of a Review of Women with Particular Vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice System](#)' ('The Corston Report'). The report was commissioned in response to 27 women over 2 years committing suicide in prisons in England.
4. The Corston Report recommended that what was best for most women in prison was to be presented with an opportunity to turn their lives around rather than sitting idle in prison for a few months. Additionally, a series of women's community centres were proposed in order to provide women with various resources on looking after children, managing debt, mental health problems, diet and substance misuse.
5. Most of the recommendations of the Report were accepted with some qualifications and Baroness Corston credits these changes with substantially reducing the female prison population and the closure of 2 women's prisons. Moreover, at the time of the Report's writing, there were 3 women's centres but now there are 51.

#### Prison as a Male Construct

6. Baroness Corston considers that prison is a male construct. She argues that prisons are designed by men for men and they are modelled after male behavioural patterns. She considers that while extreme surveillance and security might be necessary in male prisons, such a system is not tailored to women's needs. In particular, Baroness Corston notes that prison needs to be tailored to women generally being the primary carers of children because where a woman is incarcerated this can have a significant impact not just on the woman but on the whole family.

7. Baroness Corston notes that where a woman with a family spends a month on remand and ultimately does not receive a sentence, they may lose their home and their family and will rarely get them back. This issue generates private grief but also a huge public cost. A significant public cost is that being sent to prison has been shown to create a revolving door for women going in and out of prison. Baroness Corston again argues that in order to break this cycle, or even prevent it from beginning in the first place, community women's centres may provide the solution for most women.
8. Another approach that was implemented in light of the Report was a prison staff training program on the differences in dealing with female prisoners. Baroness Corston says this program was well received by prison staff who willingly engaged with the sessions.

#### Recent Progress

9. Progress on the issue of women in prison has been limited in the time since the Labour government in the UK was removed from power and since much of the English prison system has been privatized. Furthermore, Baroness Corston notes that particular vigilance is needed in relation to female prisoners because there are over 80,000 male prisoners and less than 4,000 women in prison, with the numbers tending to draw attention to the men.
10. Baroness Corston notes that many of these concerns in relation to women in prison apply all over the world and emphasises that a great deal of change can be attained by simply providing women with basic life skills and a sense of self-respect.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

### The Right Honourable Baroness Corston, PC

From 1992, Baroness Corston was the Labour Member of Parliament for Bristol East, and was in the House of Commons until 2005. She served on Select Committees on Agriculture and Home Affairs, and was the founding chair of the Parliamentary Labour Party Women's Group in 1992. She chaired several parliamentary and party groups in parliament. On the election of the Labour Government in 1997, she became Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, staying in this post until 2001, and was the first woman to be elected by Labour MPs as Chair of the Parliamentary Labour Party. She was the founding chair of the UK Parliament's Joint Committee on Human Rights, a Select Committee with membership of both houses of Parliament, continuing in that role until 2005. Baroness Corston currently chairs both the House of Lords Select Committee on Social Mobility in the Transition from School to Work and the All Party Parliamentary Group for Women in the Penal System.

### Ian Benson

Ian Benson is a solicitor at AR Conolly and Company and holds a First Class Honours degree in Law.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

[A Report by Baroness Jean Corston of a Review of Women with Particular Vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice System](#)