

# THE WOMEN BEHIND BARS

the closest most of us get to prison is Orange Is The New Black. But what's it really like inside? Meet four women who spend their nine-to-five under lock and key **By Kate Graham**



From left: Lola, Michelle, Naomi and Emma

EVEN PRISONERS WITH HUSBANDS GO "PRISON GAY"

## THE PRISON OFFICER

**Michelle Charnock, 29, from Bolton, works at HMP Styal, a women-only prison. She is married and has a 12-year-old son. She says:**

"The first time I saved a prisoner's life, I'd only been in the job nine months. I walked into the cell and saw her hanging from the bars. Complete panic flashed through me, but within seconds I'd called the team, cut her down using a special tool called a fish knife, and she was getting the care she needed. The shock of what had happened didn't hit me until afterwards. What if I'd made a cup of tea before checking on her?"

Before becoming a prison officer six years ago, I worked as a healthcare assistant and always thought I'd be a nurse. Then this job came up and I thought I'd give it a go. I absolutely loved it right away.

Of course, there are plenty of heart-stopping moments - not just dealing with prisoners harming themselves, but also them lashing out against us. That's why we're trained in a technique called control and restraint. It's not like on TV, when you see officers piling on top of someone - it's actually very controlled and safe. One person takes the head and there's an officer for each arm and leg.

We had to do it last week when a prisoner had a razor blade and was threatening to cut herself and us. The first time I had to deal with it, I was terrified. Now, the adrenalin's still there, but we're so well-trained that before long it's just a job, safe and dealing with the paperwork.

I work a shift pattern and sometimes do 10 days straight without a day off. We have around 440 prisoners and there's always the routine of making sure everyone is up, dressed, showered and has taken their medication, which can include antidepressants, anti-psychotics and methadone. But my job is really a mix of social worker and counsellor - unlocking doors and opening prisoners around is the easy bit.

Lots of relationships go on between prisoners, even for women with husbands. They call it 'prison gay'. If we know about a couple, we try to separate them, but it's a struggle to keep up with who's seeing who. On night checks, I've often looked in cells and seen prisoners in compromising situations. It's incredibly rare, but I've also heard of cases where a prison officer has left the job because they've been caught with a prisoner.

The first Christmas I was here, a woman arrived in floods of tears, eight

months pregnant, after being given 14 days in prison for non-payment of a fine. She expected to be home from court in time to pick up the kids, but instead she was bundled into a prison van. I did feel it was unfair, and I spent a lot of time reassuring her.

Often the problems prisoners experience are about their children - not knowing where they are and arranging contact through social services. As a mother myself, that can be really hard, especially on visit days when I see kids crying: 'I'm not leaving my mum.'

I know people see prison officers as tough, but sometimes you do tear up. Once, I was with a pregnant prisoner when she gave birth and watched as social services took the baby away. There were no words to comfort her.

There really is every kind of woman in prison - from shoplifters to child abusers and women who've murdered their kids. When a child murderer asks for something, I'm thinking: 'I'm not giving you anything. You're a vile person.' But we have to treat everyone the same. It isn't up to me to punish them for their crimes - that's for the courts. I'm there to keep them safe.

I always try to help where I can, but you've got to keep a barrier up and remember they're not friends. Women can be incredibly manipulative,

so you have to watch out for what we call conditioning. A compliment can snowball. Someone might say: 'Miss, your make-up looks nice,' and before long it's: 'Can you do this for me?' That's where teamwork comes in - officers look out for each other.

My mum worries, so I keep some things from her, but my husband is used to it and very supportive. Friends are intrigued - most people are when they find out what I do. But while it's extraordinary to them, it's normal for me and I wouldn't want to do anything else." ♦

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## REPORT



### THE DRAMA TEACHER

**Emma Kruger, 42, is from London. She is the co-founder of Only Connect, a charity that works in prisons and communities. She says:** "People often ask if it's scary being a woman on a prison wing with hundreds of male criminals, many with violent records. But men protect

you – if anyone ever tried anything, he'd have 10 guys on him in a second. I first visited prison when I was 22. Part of my drama degree was a project that we could take into prisons and work on with serving prisoners. After those three months, I knew it was my calling. So in 2006, I set up Only Connect, a crime-prevention charity that goes into different prisons, running workshops that teach specific skills such as better communications, working in a group and leadership. As part of that, we use drama sessions to help prepare members (that's what we call prisoners) for the outside. Prison is a very surreal place because of the noise, the bustle and the very idea that I'm walking into a building where hundreds of people are locked up. Over the years, I've worked in around 20 institutions, both male and female. Now I'm such a regular, I'm given keys that enable me to walk around without a prison guard to accompany me. There are lots of rules, though. I have to be careful not to disclose anything personal about myself

and nothing that means a prisoner could find out where I lived. Sometimes they cheekily ask questions about me, so I have to be firm.

People think that because prisoners have committed a crime, they're all the same. In fact, you'd struggle to find a more diverse group in one room. Last month, I had a 70-year-old highly educated man sitting next to an 18 year old covered in tattoos who'd left school at 13.

Apart from some banter, the men who come to my sessions are usually respectful. Of course, there are the emotional lows, like when I've seen someone take huge steps, only to get out and mess up. You pour your life into helping people change, and it's really disappointing and frustrating when it goes wrong.

On the flip side, nothing is better than seeing the difference we can make. One woman, who like many female prisoners had suffered domestic violence, kept dropping out, thinking she couldn't do it. By the end she was able to stand tall on stage, which was so powerful."

### THE LIFE COACH

**Lola Fayemi, 37, lives with her five-year-old son in London. She is a programme manager with charity Spark Inside, working with young offenders. She says:** "As a successful IT recruiter, the last place I ever saw myself was prison. But in 2012, I found myself walking into Feltham Young Offender Institution as a life coach for Spark Inside. When I was 26, my dad was diagnosed with prostate cancer, and I realised that I wanted more than money. I wanted to be fulfilled in my job and to help others. So I trained as a life coach and joined Spark, a charity that tries to reduce re-offending in young people through life coaching.

Since then I've been inside many different prisons. They're nothing like people imagine from American TV – there are no jumpsuits or people throwing things around. Some of them are more like a university campus.

Security is actually more intense in a young offender institute. No scarves are allowed because of the hanging risk, and no lip balm because they can be used as moulds to make keys. These guys have time on their hands and are very resourceful.

Coaching can be one-to-one or in groups, but it isn't like therapy. We don't talk about what led them there. We focus on who they are now and who they want to be, and most of the time I don't know what crime they committed. Either way, I try not to judge. Unless you've walked in someone's shoes, you don't understand why they do what they do.

I definitely feel for some of them, but it takes a lot for me to cry. In fact, I get more annoyed at the fact that we're locking up so many young people. I'll look at a boy who's still wearing braces and think: 'At the end of this session, he's going into a cell and the door will close behind him. What a waste of his life.' It's just inefficient and wrong.

I've seen guys light up in a session – there is a part of them that doesn't have permission to come alive in their cell or on the wing. Then I have to leave, walking through an oppressive environment. It feels good to get out, but I know I'm leaving them there, and that does make me sad.

You'd think working in prisons would make me a stricter mum, but a lot of the boys in prison had parents who were hard on them, and I don't think discipline necessarily creates good behaviour.

This job definitely makes me feel more grateful for my life. It's opened my eyes to a side of society most don't experience. I think people would benefit from seeing that prisoners are just like you and me." ➔



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