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ACTIVIST CONTRIBUTION

Reclaim Holloway: Repeating the Same Mistakes, We Can Only Expect the Same Results

Maureen Mansfield and Andrew Wilson¹

In 2016, the Conservative government closed Holloway, London's only prison for women, as part of its "new for old" prison development project. This project involves the closure and sale of old prisons to fund the construction of 9 new prisons. In the same month that Holloway closed, the campaign group *Reclaim Holloway* was formed in the aim to keep the 8-acre site under the control of the community, in Islington. In this time, Reclaim Holloway have carried out key campaign activities to raise awareness about how this land can be better used to respond to the needs of the community. Reclaim Holloway is mobilising UK-wide support as the government prepares to put Holloway on the market and privatise the land. In this article we briefly layout the proposals of Reclaim Holloway to keep the land under public control and stop the construction of more prisons.

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Holloway Prison

Constructed as a mixed-population prison in 1852, HMP Holloway has operated as women's prison since 1903. In July 2016, Holloway prison was decommissioned by the Ministry of Justice (MoJ). Between March and May last year women, whose sentence continued beyond the closure, were consequently dispersed or 'decanted' to prisons around southern England as the Ministry began the process of selling the site (Saner, 2015). Prior to its closure, Holloway held over 500 women and in order to accommodate the now dispersed women, HMP Downview was re-opened as a women's prison, having been closed following a review of the women's estate (Robinson, 2013). The government argued that "in the future, women prisoners will serve their sentences in more humane conditions, better designed to keep them away from crime."

The relocation of prisoners follows the pattern of gentrification and geographical dispersal of people in social housing, to live outside of London. Luxury properties, purchased as investments, currently lie empty where people's homes once stood. The people who lived there are now severed from their families, schools and communities, as they are forced to move away from their home environment. We are now seeing similar patterns of gentrification and geographical dispersal with the closure of Holloway and this time affecting prisoners. Relocated to Downview HMPS, women's families are expected to spend more time and money on their travel, to maintain their interpersonal relations with women, and women themselves are severed from 'community services' that would normally support them as they prepare for their release, to be rehoused and return to their home community, in London.

In announcing the closure of Holloway, George Osborne tried to recompense the closing of Holloway with the building of more 'much needed' housing. Commenting on conditions of housing inequality in London, Osborne tried to assert that closing Holloway would remedy some of London's key housing issues:

Mr Speaker, by selling these old prisons we will create more space for housing in our inner-cities. For another of the great social failures of our age has been the failure to build enough houses (BBC, 2015).

A noble, but hypocritical speech. In the six year period that George Osborne spent as Chancellor of the Exchequer, people in the UK have directly suffered from a litany of social failures and systematic neglect. Evictions in the rented

sector have reached a record high (where the main 'eviction hotpots' can be found in London and surrounding areas), homelessness has increased by 134 percent and the number of people living in temporary accommodation (mainly single women with children) increased by 300 percent (House of Commons, 2017). Contrary to popular perception, Islington, the inner-city borough where Holloway is located, is beset with poverty-related issues. It is the 24th most deprived of the country's 326 local authorities and has the fourth highest rate of child poverty. By the end of September 2016, there were 20,000 families on the social housing waiting list, with 881 families (including 1,124 children) housed in temporary accommodation (Ford, 2017). Over the past decade, private sector housing prices in Islington has more than doubled, 'far outstripping wage inflation'. Today, even median income earners cannot afford to rent or own their own a basic London property (Penny, Shaheen and Lyall, 2013). Islington has the second lowest amount of open space of any Local Authority in the country (Councils, 2010). And the scale of poverty in Islington is set to continue with the closure Holloway and government plans to privatise the land. Evidence shows that the land upon which Holloway prison now stands will ultimately serve the needs of the business class, over the community's needs. Estimated to generate £2 billion in housing development, Holloway is a lucrative investment for property financiers. Immediately following the closure of Holloway, the Ministry of Justice appointed a multinational real estate firm *Bilfinger GVA* - one of the largest UK commercial property advisers, to handle the sale of the land in August 2016 (Burke, 2016). However, one year on, Holloway prison is lying empty and, despite the government having contracted to *Bilfinger GVA*, Holloway has not yet been put on the market.

Once on the market, the government is hoping to raise £200 million, but none of this revenue will be reinvested back into the community of Islington. Instead, the revenue will be channelled into the funding of 9 extra prisons as part of the government's "new for old" prison project. This project, which Holloway is part of, will see a further closure of prisons built in the Victorian period "in order to help fund nine new prisons." (BBC, 2015). This amounts to 10,000 extra prison places at an estimated cost of £1.3billion (Ministry of Justice, 2017)

Reclaim Holloway

In the same month that Holloway closed, the campaign group *Reclaim Holloway* was set up in the aim to keep the land under the control of the community and prevent the construction of more prisons. Reclaim Holloway describes itself as “a coalition of local residents, campaigners, prisoners and ex-prisoners, and interested organizations” and collectively we are fighting for the Holloway Prison site to remain in the local community of Islington and to the people formerly incarcerated there. With the initial impetus coming from Reclaim Justice Network and Women in Prison, Reclaim Holloway quickly grew as a coalition representing a variety of interests. Interests include housing (Radical Housing Network), women’s rights and service provision (Sisters Uncut, Women’s Resource Centre, Women in Prison, Sisters of Frida, Million Women Rise), BME rights and over representation in the CJS (Black Lives Matter UK), anti-carceral advocates (Reclaim Justice Network) political activists (Revolutionary Communist Group), individuals involved in related academic field. Also involved are local residents with no affiliation beyond (in a few cases) their local residents’ associations. The coalition meet the first and third Wednesday of every month at Hilldrop Community Centre, near the prison. We pursue a range of different activities and a variety of approaches, with individual members undertaking some roles that are supported by the coalition as long as they fit within the working principles listed above. These have included lobbying political authorities (e.g. write letters to the Ministry of Justice and draft petitions), engaging with the mechanisms of local government (e.g. attend local council meetings, meet local councillors, respond and encourage community responses to planning processes). local outreach, direct action, media and press, demonstrations, attending conferences and workshops. Recently some of our members visited the New York Women’s Building project, which saw the disused Bay View Correctional Facility turned into a women’s building.

As an overall orientation, the coalition built on the determination that the Ministry of Justice should not use the money gained from the sale of Holloway to build more prisons. In a Shared Vision document drafted in early 2017, Reclaim Holloway declared that prisons are:

ineffective, dangerous and life threatening, and we believe that criminal justice system should be radically downsized, and defunded. Funds should be invested in communities, early interventions and other means of community justice and accountability. This is public land - our land - and it should not be used to generate skyrocketing

private profits for developers that shut out the community, particularly low income people and people of colour who are being increasingly priced out of the area.

As a set of basic principles, Reclaim Holloway is abolitionist, anti-carceral (“We do not support the expansion of the criminal justice system, and we do not work with those who profit from it”) and intersectional (“we leave no one, and no struggle, behind”) (Reclaim Holloway, 2017). It fits within history and legacy of the land as a site of imprisonment and the voices of the generations of women held there. Over the years, Holloway has been a site for both political protest and resistance and the women’s movement. From the Suffragettes campaigns in the early 20th century, to Radical Alternatives to Prison organisation in the 1970s, and with a variety of charities set up over the years to serve the vulnerable and marginalized women who constituted the majority of inmates held there, Holloway resistance activities have “invigorated wider debates surrounding women’s rights, health and social status outside the prison” (Bennett, 2017).

Discussions among the members of Reclaim Holloway have been distilled into three concrete proposals for what should be done with the prison site: (1) genuinely affordable housing including a significant proportion of social housing; (2) community spaces; and (3) a Women’s building providing essential social services for women while acknowledging the history of the site. In mobilising a local campaign engaged with the development process, the community have responded with suggestions on what should be developed and what, they suggest, can stop the flow of women going through the gates of Holloway in the first place. Suggestions so far include council housing, mental health support, addiction support, domestic and sexual violence services, youth projects, education, training and employment opportunities, child care facilities, better access to green public spaces. In their Draft Supplementary Planning Document, Islington Council (2017) acknowledge that the Holloway site presents some opportunity to improve the scope of affordable housing in the area. Despite high rates of delivery in the past ten years, the council recognises that “affordability has not improved” London Borough of Islington, 2017: 10) and thus, Holloway can be used to develop more affordable housing in the future. Additionally, and as part of their key planning objectives, the council are keen to explore “the provision of a women’s building/project centre that incorporates safe space to support women in the criminal justice system and services as for women as part of a wider building...” (London Borough of Islington, 2017: 9).

Considering we are destined to repeat our mistakes until we learn from them, these are also the alternatives posed by Radical Alternative to Prison (RAP), an abolitionist organisation, in their pamphlet 'Radical Alternatives to Holloway' published in 1972. Here RAP argued that community-based projects are far more useful than the imprisonment of women. Had these alternatives been pursued, we might never have seen the fourfold increase in women's imprisonment since that time: now resting at over 4,000 women in prison.

Conclusion

Holloway, London's only prison for women, holds some place in the public's imagination and memory as somewhat iconic, at least recognisable unlike many prisons. This affords the Reclaim Holloway campaign some opportunity to draw explicit attention to the failures of our over reliance on prison and the criminal justice system. The questions over the development of this public land highlights the connection between under resourced communities and the amount of money spent on the prison project. Reclaim Holloway maintains a strong focus on the development of the land and on where public money released from the sale of public land might go. The women who we have spoken with and those that are involved in the campaign, do not want to see the land developed for private profit. The community of Islington do not want more luxury flats, but need affordable social housing. Following our abolitionist principles, Reclaim Holloway want better resourced communities, not walls - the land is calling for this, we are calling for this.

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