



Locking up our daughters

Sarah Campbell, a teenager with a history of heroin use, clinical depression and a victim of child sex abuse, died in the last place she should have been – jail. To mark the launch of our Using Women campaign, **Max Daly** speaks to her mother, Pauline, about the injustice of locking up Britain's most vulnerable women.

“SHE was at grave risk,” says Pauline Campbell of her daughter Sarah, the night before the 18-year-old was sent to jail. “To put such a young, vulnerable girl who is seriously depressed into a women’s prison is horrendous and entirely inappropriate.” Despite warnings she was a high suicide risk, from a probation officer and a psychiatric nurse at her trial, Sarah ended up in a cell at Styal women’s prison in Cheshire on January 17. By 8pm the following day she was pronounced dead after taking an overdose of anti-depressants.

TERRIFIED

“Sarah was terrified when she found out she was going back to Styal,” remembers Pauline. “Her last words to me were ‘mummy, why aren’t I going to a hospital?’” Her mother says the fact Sarah had a known history of drug abuse, depression and was diagnosed with Hepatitis B and C meant she was neither mentally nor physically fit to be sent to a regular jail. To add to her distress, Sarah was scared enough to ask to be put on protection in Styal because she was seen as a ‘grass’ by her co-defendant after giving evidence in court. In a controversial case, Sarah and a friend were found guilty of the manslaughter of a 72-year-old man who had a fatal heart attack after they hassled him for spare change in Chester town centre last May.

Sarah is one of thousands of women with a track record of

mental health problems, physical and sexual abuse and drug misuse who end up in British jails each year. Half of the 4,500 women in jail have reported suffering some form of serious abuse in their lives, while a third have a drug problem. Most, like Sarah, are sentenced for non-violent acquisitive offences to support drug habits. Only one in seven are jailed for violent offences.

“The government is ducking its responsibility,” Pauline says. “It seems to lack the will to take the necessary steps to give these vulnerable women appropriate treatment. They are doing it on the cheap by herding them all into the same place, expecting prison officers to deal with it. The whole thing is made worse by the fact prisons are over-crowded, and made worse again by the fact prisons are understaffed. The whole cocktail of problems is exacerbated even further because prisons are under funded. Whatever way you look at it, it is a recipe for disaster. It goes a long way to explaining why there has been an increase in the number of deaths of female inmates.”

SELF HARM

The outcome of putting what are effectively some of the most vulnerable and desperate people in society into one of its toughest regimes is painful and well-documented. A third try to kill themselves. Between January and June this year, more than 700 women, one in six of the female prison population, either mutilated their bodies or attempted suicide. Methods of self harm recorded

by the Prison Service among its female estate range from scratching wrists with nails, inserting sharp objects up orifices and banging heads against walls to cutting arteries, taking overdoses and hanging. So far this year, 11 women have taken their own lives while in prison, four of these at Styal.

At the time of her trial, Sarah was taking anti-depressants, prescribed when she was 15, and was on a course of anti-psychotic drugs. Her mental health had received a battering during the six months she spent locked in a cell for 23 hours a day while on remand at Styal in 2002. Psychiatrists at the prison told her she would have stayed on the prison’s 10 bed psychiatric wing, but it was full. She was also told that if she was convicted she would be sent to a secure hospital.

“As far as women with mental illness are concerned,” says Pauline, “prison is simply no place for them. They should be in a secure hospital. Neither is it a good place to put those with drug problems: they should be in a drug rehab centre, secure if necessary. Many inmates have both these problems, and prison is certainly not the right place for them.”

In addition, Pauline says while on remand Styal failed to deal with her daughter’s two year heroin problem. “She was taking NHS prescribed methadone and illegal heroin, both very powerful drugs, and they were abruptly stopped, which is very dangerous. She was discharged on bail before the trial with no medication, no psychiatric cover and no access to her GP. The only thing she came out with was headlice.”

Sarah Campbell, top left, aged 18, and Pauline Campbell, right, “...the odds were stacked against her.”



Chris Thomond

stacked against her”, says Pauline, a retired college lecturer. “She was intelligent, a lovely person but she’d had knock after knock after knock.

CHILDHOOD TRAUMA

“The fact she had no contact in person with her father since she was four caused her a lot of distress. All her friends had a dad. Whether or not their parents were divorced, they all saw their dads. She felt different, she felt left out, she felt abandoned and rejected.”

When she was a young child Sarah was diagnosed, by a specialist at a Manchester children’s hospital, with early childhood trauma caused by child sexual abuse. “This was,” says Pauline, “something over which she had no control and nor did I. From what she told her best friend I get the impression Sarah was feeling ashamed, guilty and bad about the abuse.” She suffered pneumonia when she was 14, unusual in a healthy teenager, and was regularly bullied at school.

QUEEN’S PARDON

Pauline is set to appeal against Sarah’s conviction and sentence, in the hope of gaining a posthumous Queen’s Pardon for her daughter. She is convinced that if the court had been given a full account of Sarah’s childhood trauma and state of mind at the time, coupled with the absence of any violent aspect to her crime, the trial would have ended without a custodial sentence. Six women have taken their own lives at Styal prison since August last year. But Pauline has dismissed investigations into the deaths by the Prison Service as lacking independence. She has also criticised a probe into the death in August of the sixth woman, Julie Walsh, and its relation to the previous five deaths, as “a quickie job”. She says the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman investigation, due to be published as *Druglink* went to press, also lacks independence, fails to involve the families of the dead, and does not examine the other deaths in any depth. “There are serious failings that are not being addressed at Styal,” says Pauline. “If the problems of overcrowding, understaffing and inadequate resources were addressed after the first death, Sarah might still be here today.” ■

“The government is ducking its responsibility. It seems to lack the will to take the necessary steps to give these vulnerable women appropriate treatment.”

KNOCK AFTER KNOCK

So how did a girl who was, at 15, a talented artist, LTA-rated tennis player and purple belt in karate, end up having her short life summed up by the Press Association headline, ‘BEGGAR DIES A DAY AFTER MANSLAUGHTER CONVICTION’, on what would have been her 19th birthday?

“She had a rough ride in life”, Pauline says of her daughter. She is not making excuses for Sarah, nor is she exaggerating the series of

hard knocks that led her daughter to heroin and eventually jail. “I think there is a lot of ignorance among the general public who just see people who take heroin as a bad lot without necessarily understanding their background.” Like most problem hard drug users, Sarah used heroin as a comfort blanket to cope with a relentless tide of bad experiences in her life. It was not something she decided to do on a whim. “There is no question Sarah was very unhappy about a number of things. The odds were