

Debate Activity Task Sheet

Women Offenders and the Use of Prison

Motion: “Prison should be used only as a last resort for women offenders.”

Your challenge: Work as a debate team to build a persuasive, evidence-based argument using the Women’s Justice Board report on reducing women’s imprisonment. The report argues that women are a small minority in the criminal justice system, that many women in contact with the system have complex needs linked to trauma, abuse, poor health and social disadvantage, and that prison is often harmful and ineffective at reducing crime. The report states that women make up 4% of the prison population and 17% of those serving community sentences, and argues that more women should be diverted from prison and supported in the community.

1. Group Roles

Group A: Support the motion	Group B: Challenge the motion
Argue that prison should only be used as a last resort for women offenders. Use evidence from the report to explain why community support, early intervention and rehabilitation may be more effective than imprisonment for many women.	Identify potential weaknesses in the motion. Consider whether some offences require custody, whether community alternatives are always strong enough, and how the justice system should manage public protection risks.

2. Key Issues to Explore

- **Deterrence:** Does prison stop women from reoffending, or does it fail to address the causes of offending?
- **Rehabilitation:** How might women’s centres, health services, housing support and trauma-informed services help women change their behaviour?
- **Public protection:** When might custody be necessary to protect the public? How should risk be assessed fairly?
- **Cost-effectiveness:** Is it better value to fund community support, early intervention and diversion rather than prison places?
- **Impact on families and children:** What are the consequences when mothers or primary carers are imprisoned? The report highlights keeping families together as one reason for supporting women in the community where appropriate. The report argues that in most cases women should be supported in the community to overcome the causes of offending, keeping families together and improving life chances.

3. Preparation Tasks

1. **Read the article carefully.** Highlight at least three pieces of evidence that help your side.
2. **Create your strongest argument.** Explain your point, support it with evidence, and link it directly to the motion.
3. **Prepare a counterargument.** Predict what the other side will say and plan how you will respond.
4. **Use specialist vocabulary.** Try to include terms such as *rehabilitation*, *deterrence*, *reoffending*, *community sentence*, *public protection* and *trauma-informed support*.
5. **Assign speaking roles.** Decide who will open, who will present evidence, who will challenge the other side, and who will conclude.

4. Suggested Debate Format

Stage	Activity	Time
Opening statements	Each side introduces its main argument.	2 minutes per side
Evidence round	Each side presents evidence from the report.	3 minutes per side
Challenge round	Groups ask questions and respond to criticisms.	4 minutes
Final statements	Each side summarises why its position is stronger.	1 minute per side
Class vote	Vote on which side used evidence most effectively.	2 minutes

5. Success Criteria

- I can use specific evidence from the report to support an argument.
- I can explain both the benefits and limitations of using prison as a last resort.
- I can consider public protection as well as rehabilitation and family impact.
- I can respond respectfully and confidently to opposing arguments.
- I can reach a balanced judgement based on evidence.

Reflection question: After the debate, write one paragraph answering: *Should prison be used only as a last resort for women offenders? Explain your view using evidence from both sides.*