

**Fact finding visit to Harku women's prison, Estonia  
on 21 June 2006 by the Quaker Council for European Affairs**

On 21 June 2006 a female staff member of the Quaker Council for European Affairs visited Harku prison, Estonia accompanied by an independent female interpreter. We were shown around the prison by the male chief of the imprisonment department and a female employee from the Estonian Ministry of Justice. We visited the accommodation block, the punishment cells, the medical rooms, the mother and baby unit (MBU) and spoke with a doctor, who was the head of the medical centre, and 2 female prisoners.

Background on Harku prison

Harku prison is the only women only prison in Estonia and is a closed prison located on 8.3 hectares of rural land on the eastern side of the Harku settlement, about 12km away from Tallinn<sup>1</sup>. At the time of the visit there were 151 prisoners at Harku, comprising both adult and juvenile convicted prisoners.

The different prison buildings are in several different blocks with a lot of space between them covered with grass and trees. Around the perimeter was a wire fence and there was one small watch tower at one corner. There was a wooden playground in the grass which can be used by visiting children or those living with their mothers (up to 3 years old). The grounds had a peaceful and relaxed atmosphere about them; washing was hanging up behind the accommodation block and the women prisoners were milling around freely. Two women prisoners were mowing the lawn and doing some weeding.

The prison has a library and chapel which we passed but didn't have time to look in. We saw the sports hall (basketball court) which is used by both staff and prisoners but not at the same time.

Unlike remand prisoners in Estonia, convicted prisoners are entitled to work and education

Daily routine

We were shown the accommodation block and saw one of the biggest dormitory rooms with 8 bunk beds in it. All the doors and some windows were open in the building and the women were wandering around freely. We were told that all the rooms have been recently painted (previous wallpaper was from the Soviet times). The room and corridor were fresh and clean but old. There are 2 floors of rooms and women are allocated beds and have no choice over which room they will be in.

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<sup>1</sup> Estonian Ministry of Justice website: [http://www.vangla.ee/??set\\_lang\\_id=2](http://www.vangla.ee/??set_lang_id=2)

Russian and Estonian women are not separated into different rooms, but juveniles and adults are, although they all live in the same building. If a woman doesn't get on with her roommate and wants to move room, then she has to speak to the head of security about the problem and explain why. Since the rooms have been decorated, the chief of the imprisonment department told us that the women no longer smoke in their room as they want to keep it fresh and clean.

One of the women we spoke to was in prison for the 2<sup>nd</sup> time (many women are here for re-offending)

### Work and Education

Women prisoners have paid jobs inside the prison and skilled workers can earn up to 3,000 - 4,000 Estonian kroons per month (€191 - €255), which is an amount comparable to the wages of a rural blue-collar worker. On our visit we glimpsed into a large room with lots of sewing machines owned by a state company.

One of the women we spoke to did maintenance work in the grounds of the prison for 2 hours a day. The other women did stitching work and training work for 4 hours a day after school (except in summer when there is no school and she worked for 8 hours a day).

According to the website of the Estonian Ministry of Justice it is possible to get both a basic and secondary education at Harku<sup>2</sup>. Both women prisoners we spoke to were studying secondary level education at Harku (studied in schools by young people aged 16-18).

They had both finished basic schooling but didn't say whether this had been in prison or not.

### Contact with the outside world

The women are allowed visits once a week up to a maximum of 3 hours. During these short visits the prisoner and visitor(s) are separated by a glass partition and no physical contact is allowed. At least once in every 6 months 3 day conjugal visits are allowed between the prisoner and her partner/family. We did not have a chance to see the rooms/facilities where the conjugal visits take place. Visiting rights may be taken away for bad behaviour.

Convicted prisoners are entitled to 21 days of leave from the prison each year.

### Maternity and pregnancy

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<sup>2</sup> Estonian Ministry of Justice website: [http://www.vangla.ee/??set\\_lang\\_id=2](http://www.vangla.ee/??set_lang_id=2)

There have been few pregnant women at Harku. Pregnant women are given special attention and 2 months before the birth the woman may go to live in the mother and baby unit if she wants to, although many choose to stay in the normal rooms. For the birth the pregnant woman is taken to a civilian hospital, where she will stay for around 2 days. Guards are present during the birth, but the woman is not handcuffed.

Harku is the only prison in the country to have a mother and baby unit (MBU) which has room for up to 6 mothers and their babies. At the time of our visit, there was no-one residing in the MBU. It consisted of 2 bedrooms with room for 3 mothers and 3 babies in each, a bathroom between the 2 rooms which had a bath in which to wash the baby, a kitchen where mothers prepare food for the babies and a shower room with 2 showers. The showers were clean and modern but the rest of the unit seemed very basic, old and bare. There weren't many toys in the MBU and there was no television. (Prisoners are only allowed a television, which is considered an extra privilege, with the permission of the prison director)<sup>3</sup>

#### Children on the outside

One of the prisoners we spoke to had a 16 year old boy on the outside who was living with her brother. The other woman had 2 children who were living with a foster family.

#### Health

Medical staff include a full time doctor, 2 full time nurses, a dentist who comes in once a week and a psychiatrist and gynaecologist who also both come in once a week. Special doctors can come on request. No medical staff are available during the night and prisoners can't choose to see a woman medical person if they want to. Medical facilities consisted of 3 rooms – a room where they prepare medicine, a doctor's room (also for gynaecological examinations), and a dentist's room.

At the end of the visit we spoke to a female doctor who was head of the medical department at Harku. She said that, like women in general, women prisoners have a lot of problems (more than men). They are more emotional and unstable, and this can be exacerbated by imprisonment.

#### Mental Health

There is not a problem with suicides at Harku. The doctor told us that often self-harm is only done for attention; for example, it is only done during the daytime and the women use razors to scratch themselves but not to cut themselves. One of the women we interviewed however, had scars from deep cuts all the way up both arms, although these may have been from before her imprisonment (she

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<sup>3</sup> Estonian Imprisonment Act, accepted 14 June 2000 (RTI2000, 58, 376), effective (official law) from 1 December 2000.

talked to us about her past history of abuse and family problems). The doctor said that there had been one case in the last five years where a woman had self-harmed by biting herself.

The doctor said that there is often more of a problem of self-harm among women who are in pre-trial imprisonment as they are far less sure of their future than the women at Harku.

Eating disorders were increasing and they were described by the nurse as one method by which prisoners sometimes manipulate staff, sometimes by just deciding that they won't eat.

Last year one patient had a gynaecological cancer operation. She now has emotional and weight problems due to early onset of menopause.

Nine women are on medication (pills) for depression. No woman has been diagnosed with having a mental disorder but the majority of women have behavioural problems.

Any person that is so mentally ill that they cannot be responsible for their crimes in the eyes of the law are sent to a separate special institution.

#### HIV and sexual health

At the time of the visit there were 36 HIV positive women at Harku.

#### Security and discipline

The punishment cells are in a separate compound on the prison complex, separated from the other buildings by a wire fence. Two locked gates have to be passed through to get to the small concrete block which was old and dilapidated. The block contained 4 cells, 2 of which were punishment cells.

Only one woman at a time occupies a punishment cell. Women can bring only basic toiletries with them to the cell and are given only the bible or punishment rules to read. The punishment cell we saw contained a fold down bed that is locked up during the day and a toilet and a sink all in a dilapidated condition. There was also a table and 2 seats which were built into the wall. The prisoner can sleep on the bed only during the night and is given a blanket at night time. The blanket is taken away during the day, unless it is particularly cold or damp or if the prisoner has a medical condition. If a prisoner has a medical condition and breaks the rules, then the doctor will decide if the prisoner is fit to be sent to the punishment cell. S/he will also decide at this time whether that prisoner can have a blanket during the day because of that medical condition. Within the small compound containing the punishment block there was a small exercise box where

the prisoners are allowed for 1 hour a day. The exercise box measured about 15 m<sup>2</sup>, and had a concrete floor and wire sides and roof.

The maximum stay in the punishment cell is 45 days (if, for example, a woman gets drunk, uses drugs or misbehaves while on leave from prison). A prisoner may get 25 days for not obeying the guards and 1 -2 days for smoking cigarettes in the toilets.

As well as punishment cells there were 2 'locked cells' in the block. These are not for punishment but a woman can request to come to one if she feels she is becoming mentally unstable or needs isolation but not punishment. The locked cells were similar to punishment cells but the prisoner can bring along more of her personal belongings. At the time of our visit all 4 cells were empty – we were told that the prisoners are calmer and less likely to misbehave during the summer.

### Guards

Both female and male guards are employed at the prison and the supervisor of the guards is male. There are 3 contact persons for the prisoners (1 male and 2 female). The role of a contact person is to explain the rules to new prisoners, and acts as a link between the prisoner and the departments within the prison. The contact person also monitors how prisoners comply with their sentence plans and their progression<sup>4</sup>.

### Summary of good practice/positive aspects at Harku prison

- The relaxed nature and spaciousness of the prison grounds.
- The mother and baby unit with space for up to 6 mothers and their babies.
- If skilled, the women prisoners are able to undertake relatively well-paid work.

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<sup>4</sup> Country Report for Estonia (4-11 May, 2003), Research project for the Central and Eastern European Network of Drug Services in Prison in co-operation with the European Institute for Crime Prevention and Control, affiliated with the United Nations (HEUNI), Dr Morag MacDonald, University of England, 2004, p7.