

# ‘WHY DO THEY NEED TO PUNISH YOU MORE?’: WOMEN’S LIVES AFTER IMPRISONMENT

**Caroline Agboola**

Department of Sociology

University of Johannesburg

E-mail: [agboolacaroline@gmail.com](mailto:agboolacaroline@gmail.com)

## ABSTRACT

This study examines the experiences of women in South Africa after incarceration. Using in-depth interviews, the experiences of thirteen women ex-prisoners who were incarcerated in South African prisons are examined. It emerged that some of the participants of this study experienced unemployment, stigma and discrimination, as well as the psychological effect of imprisonment after their incarceration; the psychological effect of imprisonment that was reported by some of the participants was reflected in the inability of this category of women to make friends and in the display of some of the habits that they learned in prison, such as staying in the dark even though they had no reason to after their incarceration.. It was revealed that unemployment increased significantly among the participants after incarceration. It was also revealed that some of the participants were victims of stigma and discrimination from their families, in particular, and the society, in general. Feminist pathways approach was used to explain the criminal offending of the participants and how some of their experiences after prison may result in recidivism; female headed households was found to be a pathway unique to the offending behaviour of South African women.

**Keywords:** women ex-prisoners, incarceration, imprisonment, feminist pathways approach, South Africa.

## INTRODUCTION

There is a bias in the extant literature on prisoner re-entry with a neglect of the peculiar issues that women who have been incarcerated face upon their release from prison (Richie, 2001:368). This bias is attributed to the historical neglect of issues related to women and girls in criminological studies (Belknap, 2007:2), as well as the historical and present day dominance of males in academic criminology and the criminal justice system (White and Haines, 2001:

113). This article seeks to fill this gap in knowledge by examining the experiences that the women of this study deemed significant after their imprisonment in South Africa. This article sets out by presenting some of the demographic characteristics of the participants and the method that was employed to gather the data that was generated from this study. This study constitutes part of a wider research which examined the experiences of twenty women before, during and after incarceration in South Africa. The narratives of thirteen women, with relevant experiences to the subject matter of this article, were selected from the wider research. After the presentation of the characteristics of the participants and data gathering method of this study, the feminist pathways approach is discussed in relation to women’s criminal offending and this is followed by a brief discussion of the effects of women’s incarceration. The empirical findings of this study on the challenges that women experience after imprisonment comes next. Finally, a conclusion based on the salient issues raised in this article is put forward. The broad research question upon which this study is anchored is “What are the experiences of women after imprisonment in South Africa?”

## **DATA AND METHOD**

A qualitative research design was adopted for this study using in-depth interviews to explore the participants’ experiences after their imprisonment. The participants took part in this research voluntarily; they signed consent forms and all the standard ethical procedures were observed. The participants were assured of their anonymity and the confidentiality of the information that they would provide. Pseudonyms are used for all the participants in order to protect their identities and enhance confidentiality. The interviews lasted between thirty minutes and five hours. The characteristics of the participants of this study is presented in the table below.

Table 1: Characteristics of the research participants

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>		<b>Occupation before incarceration</b>	<b>Current occupation</b>	<b>Number of dependents</b>	<b>Highest educational level</b>
May	26		Unemployed	Unemployed	2	Grade 11
Janet	23		Unemployed	Unemployed	0	Grade 9

Emelda	47		Unemployed	Unemployed	2	Grade 10
Gertrude	37		Shop assistant	Volunteer work	0	Grade 12
Lesedi	23		Banker	Unemployed	0	Tertiary education
Martha	50		Worked in a law firm	Works in a law firm	0	Tertiary education
Vanessa	29		Hair plaiter	Unemployed	0	Grade 11
Gabby	22		Unemployed	Unemployed	2	Grade 10
May	53		Medical secretary	Unemployed	0	Tertiary education
Claudia	36		Banker	Unemployed	3	Grade 12
Florence	46		Accountant	Medical Doctor	2	Tertiary education
Matilda	57		Worked in a diamond mining company	Self-employed	0	Tertiary education
Emma	52		Bookkeeper	Bookkeeper	0	Grade 12

Participants were selected by means of purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling is the selection of units, be it individuals or groups of individuals, because they possess specific characteristic(s) that pertains to the research questions of a study (Teddlie and Yu, 2007: 77). While snowball sampling involves locating “subjects with certain attributes or characteristics necessary in a study ... These subjects are then asked for the names of other persons who possess the same attributes they do” (Mutchnick and Berg, 1996: 76). In using purposive sampling, the initial participants were selected with the aid of two lists that were provided by the Department of Correctional Services (DCS), Pretoria. The first list had the names of ex-prisoners, men and women, who were released within the last five years and the second list contained the names of men and women who were parolees at the time of this study; women were selected from the two lists. In selecting participants from the parolees’ list, only women who were released within the data gathering period of this study were selected. The use

of snowball sampling involved obtaining more participants by asking the initial participants to provide access to other women ex-prisoners who were willing to be interviewed too. According to Babbie (2013: 191), “this procedure is appropriate when the members of a special population are difficult to locate”. Indeed, such difficulty was encountered in the process of getting participants for this study. Even when prospective participants were obtained, majority of them declined to participate in this study.

The unwillingness, of some women ex-prisoners to be part of this study, may not be unconnected to the traumatic effect that imprisonment has on them (De Veaux, n.d:259-260) and the stigma (Moran, 2012: 564) that the society metes out to them as ex-prisoners; this was reflected in the discussions that the researcher had with some of the prospective participants, one of them said that she did not want to be a part of this study because she wanted to put the experience behind her. Another prospective participant opted not to take part in this study due to the fact that it was an unpleasant experience which she wanted to forget. Similarly, when contacted on the telephone some prospective participants wanted to distance themselves from this study because they did not want to be reminded of their prison history. After initially acknowledging their identities by name at the beginning of telephone conversations, which was made to introduce this study to them and also set up interviews with them, some prospective participants later denied being the people whom the researcher wanted to speak with or that that they had been imprisoned.

The refusal of a lot of the prospective participants to take part in this study underscores the fact that they were aware that their participation in this study is voluntary. Thus, the women who chose not to participate in this study were aware that they may choose to participate or not participate in this study, and they opted for the latter option. The aim of this study was not to find a representative sample; hence, it will not be possible to generalise the findings of this research to all the women who are ex-prisoners in South Africa because a random sampling method was not used.

The data for this study was analysed using open, axial and selective coding. Open coding is the first stage of coding during which labels are attached to data. Axial coding comes after open coding and it involves interconnecting the main themes that were obtained during the open coding. Selective coding builds on the themes that are generated by the axial coding (Punch, 1998: 212, 216, 217; Babbie, 2013: 397–398). Consistent with Punch’s (1998) definition of

open coding, labels were attached to the individual data that were gathered from the interviews. Similar data that were obtained during open coding were later pooled together during the axial coding stage. After an initial review of the various themes that were mentioned by the participants, these themes were reduced using selective coding which resulted in the collapse of the themes into broader categories. Explanations of women criminal offending from the viewpoint of feminist pathways approach is discussed next.

## **FEMINIST PATHWAYS APPROACH AND WOMEN'S CRIMINAL OFFENDING**

The feminist pathways approach is an extension of the life course criminological framework which analyses the offending behaviour of females within the context of their past victimisation experiences; it entails giving a “voice” to the experiences of females by examining the relationship between their childhood events and traumas and the likelihood of subsequent offending (Belknap, 2007: 71).

The contribution of the feminist pathways approach to criminology and the peculiar circumstances of women regarding crime has been highlighted by researchers:

[t]he understanding of women in the criminological research framework has emerged in the form of the “pathway perspective” in recent years. Women’s entry into the world of crime is due to different reasons in comparison to their counterpart (Khalid and Khan, 2013: 13).

[n]ot only do female offenders report more victimization than male offenders, but they report more extreme victimization and more running away, mental health problems, substance abuse problems, school disengagement and deviant peer networks ... Feminist pathways theory has taken a leading role in underscoring the important influence of past victimization in the lives of offenders (Bender, 2010: 467, 470).

A vital component of feminist criminology is its emphasis on the interconnectedness between the lives of females and their subsequent offending behaviour (Mallicoat, 2012: 23); this link has been examined in the works of feminist criminologists (Owen, 1998; Daly, 1992; Belknap, 2007) by shedding light on the pathways of females into crime. One of the earliest feminist pathways studies, which was conducted by Arnold (1990), examined victimisation and criminalisation in the lives of poor, “black”, female prisoners. According to Arnold (1990: 163), “examining early childhood, adolescent, and adult experiences of Black women incarcerated in jail and prison ... reveals the process of victimization ... and subsequent criminalization”. The work of Daly (1994) represents another pioneering study on the feminist pathways approach. Some of the pathways of women into criminal offending, as identified by Daly (1994), include abuse, addiction, and economic marginalisation.

Other common pathways into crime that were identified in female offenders include childhood victimisation, poverty, homelessness, lack of education, marginalisation, oppression and dysfunctional relationships (Chesney-Lind, 1997; Cernkovich, Lanctôt, and Giordano, 2008; Estrada & Nilsson, 2012; Richie, 1996; Bloom, Owen & Covington, 2003; Salisbury & Voorhis, 2009). Some not so common female pathways to crime and imprisonment have also been identified, for example, in Palestine and India, where abusive homes, response to family-honour expectations, women’s resistance to gender-specific oppression, family rejection of potential mates, interaction with criminal men; financial nonconformity, spousal abuse, patriarchy, and the practice of dowry have been noted (Erez & Berko, 2010; Cherukuri, Britton and Subramaniam, 2009).

Studies into the feminist pathways have noted that there are other factors that influences female crime, such as the harmful effects of childhood trauma and victimisation as well as the manner in which gender inequalities and expectations influence people’s identity, options and experiences in ways that contribute to drug use, delinquency and crime (Daly, 1992; Gaarder & Belknap, 2002; Brown, 2006). Cultural and societal norms significantly influence female pathways into crime. Subsequently, Estrada and Nilsson (2012), Banwell (2010), Salisbury and Voorhis (2009) and Cherukuri et al (2009) identified female pathways into female criminal offending as poor family background, addiction problems, mental disorders or illness, childhood neglect, physical and sexual abuse, marital problems, dysfunctional relationships, payment of dowry, patriarchy, and spousal abuse.

Continuing the discourse on the relationship between poverty and female offending, Daly (1992) identified the poor economic status of women as a major pathway into crime with women offenders from economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Richie 2001) having little employment opportunities; a combination of these factors influence women's criminal activities. With the preponderance of female-headed households in South Africa, which results in greater financial burden on women, and increasing feminisation of poverty (Ratele, Shefer and Clowes 2012: 554; Shisana, Rice, Zungu and Zuma, 2010: 39) it is not surprising to see an increase in female crime statistics in South Africa.

In conclusion, feminist criminology argues that women have been largely ignored in criminology and, even when they are included in criminological studies, their inclusion is conducted in a stereotypical and sympathetic manner (Newburn, 2013: 313; Mallicoat, 2012: 8). Both the perception of women as inferior to men and the exclusion of female and gender issues from criminological studies have been challenged by feminists in several ways, one of which is the feminist pathways approach which advocates that the experiences of women and girls in relation to crime be studied by considering their past experiences and their effects on female criminality.

## **THE EFFECTS OF IMPRISONMENT ON WOMEN**

The number of women prisoners in South Africa is growing (Dastille, 2011: 293) and mothers constitute a significant number of the population of ex-prisoners (Arditti and Few, 2005: 1). Imprisonment creates a unique challenge for mothers as they are faced with the decision of the placement of their children. Successful re-entry back into the family and the society has been shown to reduce recidivism and help to break the cycle of poverty which children grow up in as a result of their mothers' absence due to imprisonment (Arditti and Few, 2005: 1).

The effects of imprisonment are often felt by female prisoners long after their release from prison. Carlen (1990: 17) notes that "a woman's experience of imprisonment crucially affects her prospects on release ... too often that experience is damaging and debilitating". A number of problems arise from the incarceration of women, particularly within the families. Family instability often precedes the incarceration of some women and imprisonment may, in turn, exacerbate this instability, and this may constitute a pathway to re-offending (Cherukuri et al, 2009). The absence of a mother because of imprisonment may have devastating effects on

members of her family, especially her children who may experience anger and resentment as a result of their mother's incarceration and her resultant absence from the family. Aggression, delinquency, substance abuse, poor school grades, and mental health problems are some of the negative behavioural changes that the children of incarcerated women exhibit as a result of the pain of separation from their mothers; from the foregoing literature, these are some of the major pathways of females into crime, hence the not surprising conclusions from empirical studies that there is an increased likelihood that these children will be incarcerated and will neglect and abuse their own children. The imprisonment of mothers usually result in their children being cared for by extended family members (Sarri, 2009: 301–303).

The most unpleasant effect of women's imprisonment is the separation from their children. The desire for women to preserve the bond between them and their children during and after imprisonment creates anxiety and stress for women. Some of the peculiar challenges that women prisoners face, such as the long distance between their homes and the prisons, which results in reduced interaction between them and their families, adds to the strain the women experience after imprisonment in the process of re-connecting with their children and other family members (Arditti and Few, 2005: 2) . On their release from prison, women ex-prisoners often anticipate happy reunions with their children and other family members but are often ignorant of the pain that their children experienced as a result of their imprisonment. The anger, anxiety and turmoil that is felt by the children of women ex-prisoners are fuelled by the sense of desertion that they felt when their mothers were incarcerated and/or the confusion regarding how to react to their mothers' return home because they may have transferred their affections for their mothers to the people who took care of them during their mothers' absence. Understandably, the pain that the family members of incarcerated women suffer during and after the women's incarceration fuels the difficulty encountered in mending damaged emotional ties between them upon the release of the women from prison (Muntingh, 2009: 25).

The fact that most women “offenders are released with nothing except the clothing they are wearing and a bus ticket” compounds the experiences of women after imprisonment (Sarri, 2009: 309) and may serve as pathways to their re-offending. Empirical findings based on the experiences that the women in this study encountered after imprisonment are examined subsequently.



## **Reinforced unemployment**

Women's crimes is closely linked to their unemployment (Steffensmeier & Allan, 1995: 87-88) with the economic marginalisation of women leading to an increase in women's offending (Steffensmeier, 1993). Table 1 indicates that there is a significant increase in unemployment before and after incarceration among the participants as four of the women who had jobs before incarceration were not able to secure employment after their imprisonment. The women who were able to become gainfully employed after incarceration took lower paying jobs than those which they had before their incarceration; this was due to the widespread discrimination that women with criminal records experience in their effort to secure jobs when they return to their communities (Pager, 2002: 956). One of the most significant post-incarceration experiences as narrated by the participants of this study was the difficulty in securing employment after their incarceration; May explained her experience in this regard:

When you go to hunt for a job. They say you are a criminal, they don't hire you ... Create more jobs for those that come from jail ... Even now, I am trying my best so that I can get a job. Even any job that I can get.

Another participant echoed May's view:

It's difficult getting a job because of my criminal record. It's just bad...It's bad. It's very hard finding a job with a criminal record. It's hard, man, and it's frustrating because I mean, I have come clean...going to look for a job, and you get turned down because you have a criminal record (Janet).

Emma was all too aware of the repercussions that the disclosure of her criminal record will have on her job, hence she chose not to disclose it. She was able to hide her criminal record from her employer because she was not asked about it when she was interviewed for the job:

I did not and cannot tell my employers that I came to DCS [the Department of Correctional Services] today to sign my liberation papers. I am always scared my employers will find out about my prison life. Every day, I think 'what if they find out today?' They can fire me

because I did not declare my criminal record...it is not easy living with this lie [hiding a criminal record]. You feel you are betraying your employers. It's not nice to betray people. I am not that kind of person, but I have to do it. Otherwise, I won't get work. I was very lucky that I was not asked for it''.

The low level of education of ex-prisoners and their limited work experience contributes to their reduced chances of getting jobs; this is more so for women ex-prisoners who have even reduced chances of securing jobs compared to men ex-prisoners (Alós, Esteban, Jódar and Miguélez, 2015; 43-44). The level of education and work experience of the participants of this study did not significantly influence their employment as the participants with little education, higher education, little work experiences and extensive work experiences had challenges in getting jobs.

According to Richie (2001: 370), "most of the women who are released from jail or prison are likely to return to the same disenfranchised neighbourhoods and difficult conditions without having received any services to address their underlying problems". Martha was of this view in her narration of how she was able to secure a job after her imprisonment. Even though she got a job after she was released from prison, Martha admitted that she was more fortunate than a lot of women who are former prisoners:

I have been luckier than most ex-prisoners. I was able to go back to the kind of job that I was doing before my imprisonment...The chances of a female ex-prisoner getting a job after imprisonment are very slim. Most of these female ex-prisoners have no money, no jobs, and are often faced with the kind of circumstances that made them commit the crimes that they were imprisoned for.

In line with Richie's (2001: 369-370) study which found that the number of women with full-time employment before imprisonment in state prisons in the United States of America is less than 40%, this study revealed that one of the women worked part-time, as a hair plaiter, before incarceration and that her working part-time job was not a choice that she made but a decision that was imposed on her by the lack of regular customers who wanted to make their hair.

This study found that unemployment increased significantly among the participants; this doubled from four women to eight women before and after incarceration respectively. Poverty, which is created by women's inability to become gainfully employed after imprisonment, produces financial strain which may act as a pathway to re-offending (Richie, 2001: 369-370) thereby creating a cycle of unemployment and re-offending in the lives of women. The difficulty that women face in getting jobs after incarceration is entrenched by the stigma and discrimination that they encounter as a result of their criminal history and these are discussed next.

### **'She is from prison'-Targets of stigma and discrimination**

Stigma constitute a barrier for ex-prisoners in the process of re-entry (Moran, 2012: 564) and an obstacle, in the form of discrimination, to their employment (Van Dooren, Claudio, Kinner, and Williams, 2011: 30; Moran, 2014: 40). The women in this study experienced stigma as a result of their incarceration, especially when they had to disclose this information to other people, for example, when they went looking for jobs. Vanessa explained the discrimination that she experienced in her search for a job after her incarceration:

I once went to this funeral parlour [to look for a job]... So, they ask question, 'Have you been to prison before?' and I told them 'Ja' [yes]. They say they don't want ex-prisoners to work there because they can steal from them. I told them that I was arrested for assault not stealing. So, this guy was like aggressive towards me. So, I left the place ... It made me feel so left out. I felt so small. For a moment there, I felt like a prisoner, after the guy told me those things. So, it hurt inside. I had to leave immediately after he told me that. I left, I didn't even say goodbye because my heart was full ... eish! It hurts you see.

Some of the narratives of the women in this study indicated that the communities in which they live often stigmatise them for having been imprisoned. This is not uncommon as Waldman (2015) contend that women ex-prisoners experience stigma from the members of their

communities. Lesedi, Gabby and May narrated their experiences in relation to the stigma that they encountered:

[sighs deeply] ... you know, when you come back [from prison], it's difficult being accepted by your community because you are labelled a criminal, a thief, everything, except your name, and that's tough (Lesedi).

People, they were like saying 'She is from prison', you see. Ja [yes], everyone was looking at me. She was in prison ... what what (sic)... I can say, you know, society, when they [women prisoners] come out [of prison] ... they [the society] can say ... they are a killer ... what what (sic). Maybe if they can stop saying those things ... Ja [yes] (Gabby).

People can treat you like shit once they know that you are from prison [have been to prison] and that is not necessary (May).

Claudia spoke about the stigmatisation that she experienced as a result of being an ex-prisoner. She maintained that even though punishment has been meted out to women ex-prisoners for the crimes that they committed by incarcerating them, the society continues to punish them after incarceration through stigmatisation:

You know what? ... some people outside [prison], when you say "I'm a [ex-] prisoner" then they treat you bad and say, "Oh, you stole money or whatever". I experienced it in my own life. They immediately go and lock up their stuff. I think people can just treat ex-prisoners better ... I was there for ... years. I have lost a lot, my children, my family you know, that's punishment. So, you [the former prisoner] are already punished, why do they [people in the community] need to punish you more? And they can look down at (sic) you...

In addition to the stigma that is experienced from the larger community, it was revealed that the women who have been incarcerated also experienced stigma from their family members:

It's a whole new world [after imprisonment]. It's like a different place...Some people are judging you, calling you names...Some of my mother's family members did not want anything to do with me up until today. They say that I'm a criminal, I'm bad, I'm not a good influence on their kids, I'm the baddest of the family, I mustn't come near them and all that (Janet).

... the youngest one [her son; her youngest child], when we fight [have misunderstandings], he will always tell, "I wasn't in prison!" and then it makes me mad, and then I tell him, "Yes, you know I made a mistake. I have paid (sic) my mistake. It's finished now. I don't want to talk about it again!". You know, when they [members of her family] see that you are pushing them in a corner, they think, "Oh, now I know what to tell her, after all you were in prison and not me" (Florence).

Gertrude discussed the stigma that she experienced from members of her household as well as her community:

You know, my younger sisters né?, especially at home, they used to like when they lose their money or they lose anything, they used to treat me like ... eh, this one is a [ex-] prisoner ... It used to make me feel bad because ... I felt just because I went to prison they have to treat me like this? I am accused of taking anything that goes missing, and then I will just find them gossiping around, you know. So, it was not easy. People in the community, I can't talk about them because they scare me more. They feel this one she is from prison, she will beat us this one (sic), she will kill us.

The impact of the stigmatisation that May experienced was so great that she became emotional when she recounted it.

When I leave (sic) prison, I was supposed to go and live with him [her boyfriend] because I was supposed to get a divorce, and then we were supposed to get married, but then, unfortunately, he died about a week before I was supposed to come out...What was particularly painful was because I was in prison [sobbing], I couldn't go to the funeral. The prison gave me

permission to go to the funeral, but his family was very against it because they didn't agree with the fact that I was in prison, they didn't even talk to me till today. Not one of them came to me and gave me their condolences. I have more sympathy from complete strangers [sobbing]. I don't know, maybe, they think because I was in prison, I have got no feelings.

The strain in the interpersonal relationships that occur as a result of the stigmatisation and discrimination which the women experienced from their families and the society after incarceration makes them prone to re-offending (Broidy and Agnew, 1997: 284). In other words, the stigma of not being accepted by certain family members and the society in general after imprisonment may make some women ex-prisoners revert to their old habits by socialising with the kind of people with whom they related with before they were imprisoned. This adoption of old habits and interactions with old friends after incarceration, especially when they are the wrong crowd, increases the likelihood of recidivism among women (Richie, 2001: 370). The stigma and discrimination that the women in this study encountered generated other disturbances in their lives as is evident in the discussion of the next finding.

### **Family breakdown and the psychological effects of imprisonment on women after incarceration**

Barrick, Lattimore and Visher (2014: 281-282) expound the importance of familial relationships in the lives of women after imprisonment and the link between these relationships and the successful re-entry of women. The negative effect of stigmatisation and discrimination due to incarceration is so intense that it sometimes splits families and results in irreparable rifts in familial relationships. The strain that incarceration exerts on marriage often results in its dissolution. Divorce becomes inevitable as a result of the pain of separation between women prisoners and their husbands (Wildeman and Muller, 2012: 23-24). Emotional suffering, which is one of the negative effects of women's incarceration (Arditti and Few, 2005: 2) is reflected in Florence's narration; she attributed the breakdown of her marriage and her eventual divorce from her husband, as well as the disintegration of the emotional ties that she shared with her children to her imprisonment:

I was happily married [before incarceration] with my husband, two children and, while I was in prison, things just started...You could see they [her husband and kids] were frightened [when she had to go to prison] ... What's happening now? Mom is going to prison now ... and him [her husband], my wife all these time, I was trusting her ... and he said to me once that if I did this [committed the crime that she did], I could have cheated on him with another man, which I would never do. It wasn't in my books, I would never ever do it. We were married for 23 years, it's a long time. So, prison destroys families, relationships, breaks up marriages, and there is no support inside there to help you...while I was in prison, about a year before I got released, we decided that we gonna divorce... my youngest son, if I am telling him, '... Do this and this', then he'll tell me, 'Who are you to tell me I must do this and this because you were away from us for ... years, and now you want to come and tell'.

In addition to the strain that imprisonment imposes on the relationship between the women who were imprisoned and their family members, the fear of being stigmatised and rejected makes it even more difficult for this category of women to adjust to life outside prison. The emotional suffering and social alienation that Martha experienced is not uncommon for ex-prisoners as a consequence of their imprisonment (Arditti and Few, 2005: 2):

After I came out of prison, my family, especially my only sister, turned their backs on me because I am an ex-prisoner [sobbing]. My younger sister told me some shit which she would never have told me, if not for the fact that I had been to prison. She told me that she had lost all respect for me. After this argument, she and I have not spoken to each other in five years. My family was disappointed in me when I was arrested, and eventually imprisoned ... When I was arrested and imprisoned, I was so ashamed of myself and the crime that I committed, that I could not tell any member of my family immediately ... Since I came out of prison..., I have never felt free to go to social gatherings, I feel as if I will sort of contaminate other people when I socialise with them. I feel ashamed of myself for having been imprisoned, and I abstain from social gatherings.

Incarceration affects women psychologically even after they have finished serving their prison sentences (United States of America: Department of Health and Human Settlements, 2001) as seen in the hindered interactions with other people, daily lives and routine expressed by Matilda, Emelda and Lesedi. The psychological effects of imprisonment that is experienced by prisoners continues in their lives post incarceration (De Veaux, n.d.:259-260); three participants narrate their experiences in this regard:

... I do not socialise with people because I am ashamed of myself and my imprisonment. I am afraid that people may somehow find out about my imprisonment and withdraw from me. I feel as if I have something to hide (Matilda).

The first few months after I came out of prison, I was still waking up very early. Then I thought I am no longer in prison, 'why must I wake up so early?' Then I go back to sleep. It's not easy to forget the life inside prison. You can't forget prison life (Emelda).

Half of the things you do [in prison] you do in the dark. Even now, my bedroom light is always off all the time [even when she is inside her bedroom at nights] because I'm used to it. I am used to sitting in the dark. That place [prison] is really dark, especially when they switch off the lights. That's when you hear crazy things now. You hear a person crying, begging to go home. It's bad. It's not nice (Lesedi).

The narratives of Matilda, Emelda and Lesedi above are examples of the effects of prisonization on ex-prisoners. Prisonization is a process whereby prison inmates' behaviour is influenced by the prison institution as a result of the peculiar way of life and harsh and strict routine that exists in such organizations. Often times, prisonization affects the feelings, thoughts and actions of prison inmates in ways so subtle that they do not realise that the changes are happening to them. The lasting effects of prisonization are felt by people with longer prison sentences and those who are imprisoned at an early age. Social alienation, psychological distancing, social withdrawal and isolation, low self-esteem, and trauma are some of the effects



that prisoners experience (United States of America: Department of Health and Human Settlements, 2001) and these manifests in the lives of women ex-prisoners after incarceration.

### **Housing problems**

In contrast to literature which indicates that securing housing after imprisonment is one of the biggest obstacles to prisoner re-entry and a pathway to re-offending (Souza, Losel, Markson, Lanskey, 2015: 307), this study found that housing constraints did not feature prominently in the participants narratives as two participants only discussed this. However, Emelda's narrative confirmed that housing problems is indeed a pathway to women's re-offending. Emelda did not experience housing problems herself but she narrated the difficulties that women ex-prisoners encounter with regards to housing and the grim realities of how this problem scare women prisoners and influence their desire to remain in prison:

I know of a lady [a fellow inmate] who did not want to come out of prison because she said she has nothing outside prison. She said she has no house to stay when she is released. She said 'go out and do what outside? Sleep under the bridge? I don't want to go out'. She did not want to leave prison [and as a result] she stabbed another prisoner with a pen, so that instead of being released, her prison sentence should be increased. I remember one of the inmates advised the lady to go out of prison and kill someone so that she will be imprisoned for life.

May, narrated how she narrowly escaped being homeless after her incarceration: "If not for my immediate sister, who is the only family that I have got, I would have been completely homeless".

Reinforced employment, stigmatisation and discrimination, the breakdown of family ties and the psychological impact of imprisonment were the issues that the participants of this study grappled with upon their release from prison. Housing problems was pointed out as a challenge that some women ex-prisoners encounter and a pathway to their re-offending. Some of the participants found the stigmatisation and discrimination that they experienced from their family members and society particularly painful as they did not expect to be continually "punished"

after their imprisonment. The acute unemployment that was mentioned in the participants' narratives is reflective of those of their colleagues as well and can keep women in a vicious cycle of crime. The conditioning factors, which is reflected in women's pathways into crime, for the crimes that women are incarcerated for becomes more complex when they return to their communities (Barrick, Lattimore and Visser, 2014: 281). However, the pathways of women into crime can be altered if positive coping strategies are learnt earlier in life (Koski and Bantley, 2013). Women ex-prisoners can benefit from the introduction of positive coping strategies too and this can ultimately alter their pathways into re-offending. The literature of women's pathways into crime indicate that there are several factors that influence their involvement with crime and these factors play vital roles in their experiences after imprisonment. The narratives of the participants of this study presents their unique experiences after imprisonment; some of these experiences are similar to and sometimes worse than those that they had before imprisonment.

Despite the challenges that the participants of this study encountered after incarceration, some of them expressed the desire not to allow their incarceration mar their lives by choosing to turn away from a life of crime and do worthwhile things with their lives after incarceration. Indeed, some of the participants have done this by choosing to go back to obtain formal education and staying away from situations that exposes them to crime. For example, after her incarceration, Gertrude is training to become a nurse; while Lesedi is currently studying towards obtaining her B.Com (Bachelor of Commerce) degree.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study discusses the experiences of women after imprisonment from the standpoint of feminist pathways model. Feminist scholars have investigated female pathways into offending by pointing out the relationship between victimisation and offending which creates a cycle of criminality in the lives of females (Daly, 1992; Sterk, 1999; Evans, Forsyth & Gauthier, 2001; Gaarder & Belknap, 2002; Giordano, Cernkovich & Rudolph, 2002). Some of the factors that women encountered after imprisonment were found to, sometimes, be a direct consequence of their imprisonment, while others were present before the women's incarceration and persisted, often times with greater intensity, after imprisonment. Four findings emerged from the thematic analysis of the accounts that the participants of this study provided based on their lives after imprisonment; these are reinforced unemployment, the stigma and discrimination that results

from imprisonment, family breakdown, the psychological effect of imprisonment on women ex-prisoners, and housing problems. Unemployment among the women in this study was shown to increase by 100% after incarceration. The far reaching effects of the stigma and discrimination that the women in this study experienced was reflected in the breakdown of the ties that they shared with their family members and the break-up of one woman's marriage. Housing is a problem for women ex-prisoners and this, sometimes, influence the offending behaviour of women prisoners. Prisoners encounter several impediments as they return to their communities after incarceration, however the plight of women prisoners in this regard is more complicated due to their peculiar experiences and pathways to crime (Barrick, Lattimore and Visher, 2014: 281). Amongst the commonly identified pathways of women into crime, this study found that the experiences of women after imprisonment, which can serve as possible pathways into their re-offending, are reinforced unemployment, the stigma and discrimination that results from imprisonment, family breakdown, the psychological effect of imprisonment on women ex-prisoners, and housing problems. These findings create pathways for re-offending in the form economic marginalisation and victimisation and oppression of women ex-prisoners, as well as dysfunctional relationships within their families (Chesney-Lind, 1997; Covington, 1998; Cernkovich et al, 2008; Estrada & Nilsson, 2012; Richie, 1996; Bloom, Owen & Covington, 2003; Salisbury & Voorhis, 2009).

## REFERENCES

- Agnew, R. 1992. Foundation for a general strain theory of crime and delinquency. *Criminology* 30: 47-87.
- Alós, R., Esteban, F., Jódar, P. & Miguélez, F. 2015. Effects of prison work programmes on the employability of ex-prisoners. *European Journal of Criminology* 12(1): 35-50.
- Arditti, J.A. & Few, A.L. 2005. Mothers' reentry into family life following incarceration. *Criminal Justice Policy Review* 20 (10): 1-21.
- Arnold, R.A. 1990. Processes of victimization and criminalization of black women. *Social Justice* 17 (3): 153 -166.
- Babbie, E. 2013. *The practice of social research*. 13th edition. New Zealand: Wadsworth.
- Banwell, S. 2010. 'Gendered narratives: Women's subjective accounts of their use of violence and alternative aggression(s) within their marital relationships'. *Feminist Criminology* 5(2): 116-134.
- Barrick, K. Lattimore, P.K. & Visher, C.A. 2014. Reentering women: The impact of social ties on long-term recidivism. *The Prison Journal* 94 (3): 279 -304.
- Belknap, J. 2007. *The invisible woman: Gender, crime and justice*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Bender, K. 2010. 'Why do some maltreated youth become juvenile offenders? A call for further investigation and adaptation of youth services'. *Children and Youth Services Review* vol. 32: 466-473.
- Bloom, B., Owen, O., & Covington, S. 2003. *Gender-responsive strategies: Research, practice, and guiding principles for women offenders*. [O] Available at: <http://www.floridatac.com/files/document/genderprison.pdf> (Accessed on 17/02/2016).

- Broidy, L. and Agnew, R. 1997. 'Gender and crime: A general strain theory perspective'. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 34(3): 275–306.
- Brown, M. 2006. 'Gender, ethnicity, and offending over the life course: Women's pathways to prison in the Aloha state'. *Critical Criminology* vol. 14: 137–58.
- Carlen, P. 1990. *Alternatives to women's imprisonment*. Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press.
- Cernkovich, S.A., Lanctôt, N. and Giordano, P.C. 2008. 'Predicting adolescent and adult antisocial behavior among adjudicated delinquent females'. *Crime & Delinquency* vol. 54: 3–33.
- Cherukuri, S., Britton, D.M. and Subramaniam, M. 2009. 'Between life and death: Women in an Indian state prison'. *Feminist Criminology* 4(3): 252–274.
- Chesney-Lind, M. 1997. *The female offender: Girls, women and crime*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Daly, K. 1992. A women's pathway to felony court: Feminist theories of law breaking and problems of representation. *Southern California Review of Law and Women's Studies*, 2: 11-52.
- Daly, K. 1994. *Gender, crime and punishment*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Dastile, N.P. 2011. 'Female crime'. In: *A Southern African perspective of fundamental Criminology* edited by Bezuidenhout, C. Cape Town: Pearson, 288–304.
- De Veaux, M. n.d. *The trauma of the incarceration experience*. [O] Available at: [http://harvardcrcl.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/DeVeaux\\_257-277.pdf](http://harvardcrcl.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/DeVeaux_257-277.pdf) (Accessed on 13/02/2016).
- Erez, E. and Berko, A. 2010. 'Pathways of Arab/Palestinian women in Israel to crime and imprisonment: An intersectional approach'. *Feminist Crime* vol. 5: 156–167.

- Estrada, F. and Nilsson, A. 2012. 'Does it cost more to be a female offender? A life course study of childhood circumstances, crime, drug abuse and living conditions'. *Feminist Criminology* 7(3): 196–216.
- Evans, R.D., Forsyth, C.J. and Gauthier, D.K. 2001. 'Gendered pathways into and experiences within crack cultures outside of the inner city'. *Deviant Behavior* vol. 23: 483–510.
- Gaarder, E. and Belknap, J. 2002. 'Tenuous borders: Girls transferred to adult court'. *Criminology* vol. 40: 481–517.
- Giordano, P.G., Cernkovich, S.A. and Rudolph, J.L. 2002. 'Gender, crime and desistance: Toward a theory of cognitive transformation'. *American Journal of Sociology* vol. 107: 990–1064.
- Khalid, A. and Khan, N. 2013. 'Pathways of women prisoners to jail in Pakistan'. *Health Promotion Perspectives* 3(1): 31–35.
- Koski, S.V. and Bantley, K.A. 2013. 'Coping with reentry barriers: Strategies used by women offenders'. *InSight: Rivier Academic Journal* 9(1): 1–17.
- Mallicoat, S.L. 2012. *Women and crime: A text/reader*. California: Sage.
- Moran, D. 2012. Prisoner reintegration and the stigma of prison time inscribed on the body. *Punishment and Society* 14 (5): 564-583.
- Moran, D. 2014. Leaving behind the 'total institution'? Teeth, transcarceral spaces and (re)inscription of the formerly incarcerated body. *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 21 (1): 35-51.
- Muntingh, L. 2009. *Ex-prisoners' views on imprisonment and re-entry*. [O] Available at: <http://repository.uwc.ac.za/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10566/231/MuntinghExprisonersViews2009.pdf?sequence=1> (Accessed on 08/08/2015).

- Mutchnick, R.J. & Berg, B.L. 1996. *Research methods for the social sciences*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Newburn, T. 2013. *Criminology*. 2nd edition. New York: Routledge.
- Owen, B. 1998. *In the mix: struggle and survival in a women's prison*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Pager, D. 2003. The mark of a criminal record. *American Journal of Criminology* 108 (5): 937-975.
- Punch, K.F. 1998. *Introduction to social research*. California: Sage.
- Ratele, K., Shefer, T. & Clowes, L. 2012. Talking South African fathers: A critical examination of men's constructions and experiences of fatherhood and fatherlessness. *South African Journal of Psychology* 42(4): 553–563.
- Richie, B.E. 1996. *Compelled to crime: The gender entrapment of battered black women*. New York: Routledge.
- Richie, B.E. 2001. Challenges incarcerated women face as they return to their communities: Findings from Life History interviews. *Crime and Delinquency*, 47 (3): 368–389.
- Salisbury, E.J. & Voorhis, P.V. 2009. 'Gendered pathways: A quantitative investigation of women probationers' paths to incarceration'. *Criminal Justice Behavior* 36(6): 541–566.
- Sarri, R.C. 2009. Maintaining and restoring family for women prisoners and their children. In: *Working with women offenders in the community* edited by Sheehan, R., McIvor, G. and Trotter, C. Devon, UK: Willan.
- Shisana, O., Rice, K., Zungu, N. & Zuma, K. 2010. Gender and poverty in South Africa in the era of HIV/AIDS: A quantitative study. *Journal of Women's Health* 19(1): 39–46.

- Souza, K.A., Losel, F., Markson, L., & Lanskey, C., 2015. Pre-release expectations and post-release experiences of prisoners and their (ex-) partners. *Legal and Criminological Psychology* 20: 306-323.
- Steffensmeier, D. J. and Allan, E. 1995. 'Criminal behavior: Gender and age'. *In: Criminology: A contemporary handbook*. 2nd edition. Edited by Sheley, JF. Belmont: Wadsworth, 83-113.
- Steffensmeier, D.J. 1993. National trends in female arrest, 1960-1990: Assessments and recommendations for research. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 9 (4): 411-441.
- Sterk, C.E. 1999. *Fast lives: Women who use crack cocaine*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Teddle, C. & Yu, F. 2007. Mixed methods sampling: A typology with examples. *Journal of mixed methods research* 1(1): 77-100.
- United States of America. Department of Health and Human Settlements. 2001. *The psychological impact of incarceration: The implications for post-prison adjustment*. [O] Available at: <https://aspe.hhs.gov/basic-report/psychological-impact-incarceration-implications-post-prison-adjustment> (Accessed on 18/02/2016).
- Van Dooren, K., Claudio, F., Kinner, S.A., & Williams, M. 2011. Beyond reintegration: A framework for understanding ex-prisoner health. *International Journal of Prisoner Health* 7 (4): 26-36.
- Waldman, D. 2015. *Women face many obstacles after release*. [O] Available at: <http://humaneexposures.com/blog/women-face-many-obstacles-after-prison-release.html> (Accessed on 20/08/15).
- White, R. & Haines, F. 2001. *Crime and criminology: An introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.



Wildeman, C. & Muller, C. 2012. Mass imprisonment and inequality in health and family life.  
*Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 8: 11-30.

## **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

**Caroline Agboola** holds a National Research Foundation Scarce Skills Postdoctoral Fellowship in the department of Sociology, University of Johannesburg. She obtained her PhD in Sociology from the University of South Africa. Her research interests include women and crime, women and girl-children, qualitative research methods and Health Sociology.