

Women, Trauma, Criminalisation and Imprisonment ...

Marie Segrave and Bree Carlton*

Abstract

This paper provides an exploratory analysis of the relationship between trauma, women's criminalisation and imprisonment. Research in this area predominantly focuses on women's pathways to imprisonment and trajectories characterised by victimisation, and social and economic disadvantage (cf Maloney et al 2009; DeHart 2005; Fine 1992). In this article we seek to shift the focus to explore the connections between women's experiences of trauma, criminalisation and imprisonment. The discussion is based on *Surviving Outside*, a research project involving interviews conducted in Victoria with 25 formerly imprisoned women and support workers who work with women post-release. The emphasis in this paper is on the life trajectories of criminalised women, marked by institutionalisation, disadvantage and an open-ended struggle for survival.

Introduction

This paper is an exploratory analysis of the relationship between trauma, women's criminalisation and imprisonment. It draws on research conducted in Victoria with formerly imprisoned women and support workers; research informed by the critical mass of feminist criminology which has put women's accounts and experiences in the foreground when critiquing processes of criminalisation and imprisonment (cf Worrall 1990; Comack 1996; Carlen 1998; Easteal 2001; Sudbury 2005; Alarid and Cromwell 2006). This body of work has clearly established that gendered contexts and experiences underpin women's criminalisation and the subsequent impacts of imprisonment. This paper builds on the recognition that criminalised women¹ sustain multiple roles and responsibilities whilst coping with ongoing and historical experiences of trauma, social exclusion and marginalisation which amplify the struggle to survive in prison and post-release (Easteal 1992; 2001; Hampton 1993; Carnaby 1998; Davies and Cook 2000; Douglas and Plugge 2008; Tye and Mullens 2006).

* Marie Segrave and Bree Carlton are lecturers in Criminology in the School of Political and Social Inquiry, Monash University. Contact: Marie.Segrave@monash.edu.au and Bree.Carlton@arts.monash.edu.au The authors thank the women who contributed their time and personal journeys to this research. Invaluable support and input was also provided by Flat Out, The Centre for the Human Rights of Imprisoned People, Melbourne Citymission, Prison Network Ministries and the Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders.

¹ In the tradition of critical scholars before us, including Balfour and Cormac (2006) and Sudbury (2005) we refer in this paper to 'criminalised women'. This signifies women's (increased) experience of being made subject to the criminal label and all that this entails including adding to their broader experience of marginalisation and to their identity.

Over the past decade the Victorian women's prison system has experienced consistent overcrowding due to an increasing population (George 2002). Recently, between 2008 and 2009, the women's prison population increased by an unprecedented 30 percent (Gelb 2010). The vast majority of imprisoned women in Victoria are drawn from the most disadvantaged and marginalised sectors in the community; most are survivors of multiple forms of abuse, many are mothers and indeed sole carers of children and half have previously experienced incarceration (Goulding 2004; Community West/Brimbank Community Legal Centre 2008; Corrections Victoria 2009). Some of the most marginalised women in the community—Indigenous women and women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds – comprise the fastest growing population in the system (George 2010). Corresponding with national trends, women in Victorian prisons have high rates of unemployment, low levels of training and education and suffer from acute physical and mental health conditions (Corrections Victoria 2009:13). These trends provide the context for the *Surviving Outside* project.

In this discussion we focus on trauma neither as victimisation nor pathology (e.g. post-traumatic stress disorder) but as a defining feature of women's experiences before, during and after imprisonment. Trauma is not a psychosocial 'state' or 'condition' understood with reference to experiences of victimisation, rather we view trauma in two significant ways. First, we understand trauma broadly; derived from direct *and* indirect experiences such as witnessing and/or encountering all forms of abuse and violence, grief associated with bereavement, loss and familial separation. Second, we view trauma fluidly, as a recurring and normalised constant within the lives of criminalised women that serves to ensconce social stigma and marginalisation. Through documenting individual experiences of trauma a more nuanced understanding of gendered accounts of criminalisation and imprisonment can be gained.

The analysis is structured with reference to pre-imprisonment, imprisonment and post-imprisonment as the formally recognised 'stages' of women's progression through the criminal justice system. Ultimately we argue that women's lives are impacted by multiple traumas past and present and that these experiences are directly related to survival both within and outside the prison.

The Research

The *Surviving Outside* project sought to contribute to the limited research into the short and long-term impact of women's imprisonment. There is considerable evidence documenting the discriminatory treatment, conditions and punitive excesses experienced by women, specifically Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) women in Victorian prisons (Cerveri et al 2005; EOVC 2006). However less is known about the effect of such experiences on post-release outcomes and whether institutional suffering may serve to compound pre-existing traumas and increase the risk of post-prison harm and/or re-incarceration. Recent Australian research has questioned the adequacy of post-release provisions for women exiting prison (in areas such as housing, health and welfare support) arguing that shortcomings have resulted in women being declined parole, re-offending and returning to prison (Baldry 2005; Baldry and Borzychi 2003; Baldry et al 2003, 2006; Davies and Cook 2000; Grimwade 1999). Other research has examined the impacts of the provision of post-release support in terms of disproportionate rates of unnatural deaths among formerly imprisoned women (cf AIHW 2009; Karaminia et al 2007; Hobbs et al.

2006; Farrell and Marsden 2007; Graham 2003; Coffey et al, 2004). However, there is little qualitative research focused specifically on the gendered intersection between legacies of trauma, imprisonment and survival.

Surviving Outside was a qualitative research project involving semi-structured interviews with women who have been imprisoned ('criminalised women'), advocates and support workers from a range of government funded and community organisations. The research comprises 25 semi-structured interviews in total; 14 with support workers and 11 with adult women in Victoria². For the purposes of this discussion we adopt 'support worker' and 'criminalised women' to distinguish between these two groups.³ The study sought to build on Davies and Cook's (1998; 1999; 2000) 1990s Victorian research which documented the biographies of women who had died post-release. Their research identified the systematic failure of the criminal justice system to address women's complex needs both in prison and post-release. Ten years on and in the midst of an unprecedented increase in women's incarceration rates in Victoria, it has been our intention to document the recent accounts and contextual circumstances surrounding women's post-release deaths and survival. In doing so, we wish to reignite discussion about the adequacy of post-release support provisions and the responsibilities of agencies when women are released from prison.

In undertaking this research our gaze broadened to engage with women's experiences of trauma and imprisonment. From the outset, past and recent experiences of trauma dominated the discussion in interviews; women's stories interweaved accounts of trauma, criminalisation and imprisonment. This is the core focus of this paper. While this research and the findings are not representative of all women who have experienced imprisonment, they add "depth to our understanding of the issues" and the complications of the tension between survival and legacies of trauma (Dodge and Pogrebin 2001:45). We argue that the justice system separates and de-contextualises women's actions from the broader social and structural context of their lives. Yet our research suggests that any analysis of women's offending, imprisonment and survival (including desistance) *must* pay heed to women's experiences of trauma, marginalisation and exclusion from the mainstream community. Our findings also highlight the importance of recognising that there are important *emotional* components to these experiences that are not quantifiable and which are difficult to neatly capture and articulate (for criminalised women, support workers and researchers alike), yet they are central to women's post-prison support and survival.

Prioritising Trauma

There has been a steady increase in research over the past two decades that has brought attention to trauma and the measurement of mental disorder and family violence, particularly in relation to recognising and diagnosing post traumatic stress disorder within the prison population. Such research emphasises trauma as pathology and draws attention to the long-term impacts of traumatic experiences and the compounding impact of multiple traumas over a lifetime (DeHart 2008; Parker et al 2009; Messina and Grella 2006; Burstow, 2003; Douglas and Plugge 2008). This research has demonstrated that for the prison

² We note that one interview was conducted with two participants interviewed together.

³ We distinguish quotations from the two groups by indicating where a quote is from a support worker. All other quotes come from interviews with criminalised women. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

population, trauma (and its impact) is commonly experienced many times over a lifetime, as opposed to trauma in the wider community where it may generally be linked to discrete and isolated events. Contemporary prison effects theory and literature has recently begun to focus on long-term psychological impacts of trauma and imprisonment, where imprisonment itself can be identified as traumatic (see Liebling and Maruna 2005; Jamieson and Grounds 2005; Grounds 2004). However, as Liebling and Maruna assert (2005:58-59), foregrounding the 'individual's developmental life history' (see also DeHart 2008; Maloney et al 2009; Halsey 2008) is critical to making sense of the impact of imprisonment and experiences post-imprisonment.

We draw on this work to highlight the need for greater depth in Australian criminological engagement with trauma and its impacts of women's imprisonment and post-release survival. From our interviews with criminalised women and support workers it became clear that *both* direct and indirect experiences have long term consequences. Attending to the gendered nature of both the *experience* and the *response* to trauma requires far more detailed analysis. While men's experiences are beyond the scope of this discussion, it is an area that also requires urgent attention. This paper begins this process from women's perspectives. We seek not to speak for women, nor to develop a theory that applies to *all* women, but to offer a reflective exploration of trauma as an underlying, consistent reality in the lives of criminalised women.

Trauma and Criminalisation

Following the work of Halsey (2008) we begin with women's biographies in order to contextualise how women's lives are affected by legacies of abuse, neglect, poverty, and institutionalisation. The narratives of women's lives consistently featured multiple traumas and social and financial exclusion. For example, at the time of interview, Beth had been out of prison for 10 years. During this process she described having survived childhood abuse, profound domestic violence situations with multiple partners, having children removed by authorities, substance addiction, suicide attempts and multiple overdoses. Helen recounted a childhood marked by familial dislocation and an adulthood marred by the removal of children from her care, repeated sexual abuse, domestic abuse, violence and multiple near death experiences associated with aggravated assault and drug overdose. She had a history of drug overdoses and 'clinical death' that began when she was 15, when she "drank 4 litres of Moselle and took 30 Rohipnal".

For many of the 11 criminalised women we interviewed, drug use was initially identified as the only avenue out of their situation – an escape or coping strategy to deal with traumatic memories and present difficulties and hardships. In many cases drug use graduated to drug addiction and vulnerability to sexual and physical harm were reported to increase:

I've been shot, I been stabbed, I been you know, kicked to death 6 times. I've never overdosed from drugs, yet I've used them every day of my life, since I was 12 and I'm what 38 now.

Helen

Drug use from an early age in addition to familial breakdown, violence and dysfunction in childhood was a shared experience among many women, which some support workers argued resulted in early and multiple pregnancies resulting in further hardships for women and their children:

They're nearly all mums; they've all been abused in some way, whether it's been incest, domestic violence, street assault, but they are individual women nonetheless, even though they carry some of the same backgrounds. *Sarah, Support Worker.*

Support workers recounted stories of imprisoned women that mirrored our interviews with criminalised women, where institutional intervention featured in women's lives from a young age, along with the constant presence and intervention of welfare and criminal justice agencies:

I think the majority of the women that we work with have those multiple and complex needs, and they've suffered trauma in their past – had DHS [Department of Human Services, Victoria] involvement... as a child, low schooling, homelessness, domestic violence. [T]hey're common denominators. *Rachel, Support Worker.*

...probably say 90% have children and within that, probably 80% have DHS involvement or have had DHS involvement with their children. *Belinda, Support Worker.*

Yet while state intervention was a constant in women's lives from an early age, intervention was never experienced nor intended as a positive or supportive attempt to assist young women to address traumatic experiences. This was highlighted in Megan's reflection on women she'd known in prison whom she felt had been abandoned by society:

I think it's the ones that have come from these backgrounds that... just don't have a chance. They've come from broken homes... physical abuse... sexual abuse or just drug-related upbringings, lack of education in every aspect.... They just don't stand a chance.... That sad, poor bracket, which not enough's being done to help them, but a lot of them don't want to be helped. *Megan*

The absence of support for women to address the ongoing impact of familial intervention including grief associated with the removal of children constantly featured within accounts of self harm and suicide attempts across women's lives:

...when they took my son Bea... I cut my wrist, I had a beautiful townhouse... right up the top of the hill. When they took him, my ex did, I cut my wrist, took a heap of Serax and I remember coming to in a hospital, it was a week later. *Helen*

Liz spoke about the impact of her own life experiences of mistreatment as a child and severe domestic violence in multiple relationships as an adult which had affected her physically and mentally but which could also be seen as impacting on her children and grandchildren later in life, as the intergenerational cycle of violence and criminalisation continued. In reflecting on their past she also commented on where her children are now, with one daughter in prison and another outside prison coping with children and a violent partner likely to soon be imprisoned:

I don't know [if the children's father bashed them]... but [watching me being bashed by their father] affected them a lot. They seen me getting belted up and... Yeah it's pretty distressing stuff.... my eldest one, she's doing okay at the moment but her bloke's ready to... be locked up; and like she's got two of her own kids. The youngest one, he's only 14, 15 months old and then she's got an 8 year old daughter and she's got two step kids. *Liz*

Liz's story embodied a general pattern identified by many of the workers interviewed – where the most disadvantaged high-needs group within adult prisons are those who have had parents and carers who have been imprisoned and who have graduated from youth offending and detention to the adult system. As this support worker explained when recalling the background of a deceased young woman released from prison in late 2009:

The girl who passed away in December [was] 26 years old [and] had been... in and out of care and, so we're talking secure welfare, youth training centres and adult prisons, and had been on and off in all of those facilities for the 13 years that I knew her... She was a very... angry young girl. Just very aimless because she went to these facilities at 13, she had disrupted schooling, had drug abuse [that] sort of started at 11 probably, and she had a stroke as a result of drug use at 15 ... But in the care of the department until she was 17 I think, got with a long-term boyfriend, had a child to him; he also had drug history and a prison history. And [when] she got out within 5 days... she overdosed and that ended up being the critical overdose and she died 3 weeks after that. *Julie, Support Worker.*

Megan also identified the intergenerational cycle of criminalisation and imprisonment she witnessed while incarcerated. Her comments resonated with those above that suggest that trauma is not about isolated childhood experiences, but situations where abuse, death, criminalisation and imprisonment are constants from an early age:

There was a woman who was in her fifties, and her daughter was in her twenties and she had her baby in custody, so... three generations in one family was there at once..... a lot of these girls just don't stand a chance. They've just grown up in the black, shit world... they don't know any other world. *Megan*

With one exception, all the women we interviewed had experienced domestic violence. Most women had been in multiple relationships with violent partners and little external intervention, which worked in favour of their partners. Two women related both their own experiences and stories of other women where violent partners were able to convince attending police that the women were 'out of control'. For criminalised women, as Helen's story highlights, there are dangers in calling authorities; she was taken by police one evening when they were called to intervene at her residence due to an old warrant for her arrest coming to light:

I was getting belted, my bloke was running through my house. He broke my ribs, ripped my hand, ripped my head open in my house and I got taken away that night. I'd never been separated from the baby, the Police took me away from something I'd done in 2003, [so I had] just [done] 14 months [in prison], fought for [guardianship of] my son been belted and then taken away. *Helen*

This was not isolated, as Carol told us:

[I]t happened to my... friend... the other day, her... boyfriend beat her up, she managed to get the kids over to her mother's place. He's thrown her out, no clothes... he's taken the car off her, no money.... The cops turn up and they arrested her, well she's got a criminal record, he hasn't. So by the time the Police get there he's all calm and collected, you know because he's got all his frustrations and anger out, but Melanie's hysterical and she's angry... *Carol.*

Many of the accounts reported to us highlight the enduring physical and emotional impacts associated with repeated trauma, including domestic violence and assaults, which featured throughout women's lives:

Oh, the first [partner] was the worst [most violent], [Sarah] and [Jo]'s father. Yeah... because of all the overdoses I've had... I've got this brain injury [but it's also a result of]... getting belted around the head with baseball bats and been thrown down four flights of stairs and been kicked in the head, and bashed, and my head banged up against brick walls and that. *Liz*

Yeah and I think of another family where... three of the five children died of overdoses [and they all had children] [And] the grandmother... had to take care of [her grand] children that were left behind and then she died. And I'll never forget one of the [kids], he was about... 11; at the funeral... he was just saying to any family members who were there, "Who's going

to look after me? Who's going to look after me?" And I remember some of the family members looking at him with compassion but just saying, "Oh you'll be looked after, someone will look after you." But I don't think anyone actually put their hand up. *Julie, Support Worker.*

Importantly, as the workers and some of the women we spoke to highlighted, not all women inside Victorian prisons have backgrounds that are as one worker characterised 'sad... bad and traumatic' (Sarah). These accounts are not intended to be representational of all women in Victorian prisons. However what emerges from these accounts is that traumatic legacies arising from child sexual abuse, assault, domestic violence, disadvantage and social exclusion comprise vital contextual factors that cannot be viewed or dealt with separately to women's experiences in prison and their journeys post-release. As one support worker stated, the point is that women are struggling to survive prior to imprisonment and the experience and impacts of incarceration cannot be understood in isolation to this context:

You know their lives are fucked before they even get there. We know what prisons do, they certainly don't do a lot unless you're well educated and you can manipulate the system...But for most those opportunities don't exist, pretty much [they are] just pumped up with drugs to keep them robotic and subservient to the system, and then they're released. And it is being released with a drug addiction, homelessness, mental health issues and you know the reunification with their children, it's just tormenting, you know you package all that up, why wouldn't you want to numb all those bad, bad memories and experiences. *Sarah*

It is through these contextual accounts that we are able to better understand the narratives of imprisonment offered by women and support workers, and to recognise the individualising and dehumanising impacts of criminalisation and incarceration.

Trauma and Imprisonment

In the early stages of research we were interested in the impact of imprisonment on women's post-prison survival. Yet it became evident early in the research process that identifying imprisonment as the central traumatic incident driving women's post-prison experiences and outcomes is too simplistic. Rather we argue that to situate post-release experiences and survival (or non-survival) with reference to the broad context of women's lives enables a more nuanced understanding of the contradictory effects and impacts of imprisonment. Despite the history of problematic conditions and management of Victorian prisons (Cerveri et al 2005; EOCV 2006; Hampton 1993) and the well documented detrimental impacts of imprisonment on men and women (Liebling and Maruna 2005; Goulding 2004; Scraton and Moore 2005) we found, as others have reported (Comack 1996), that criminalised women and support workers had contradictory attitudes towards imprisonment. We explore these briefly, as they reveal the concerning reality that while imprisonment has many negative impacts for women, they are also often the only places where many marginalised women find a sense of community.

While participants related that prison conditions had improved over the last decade, issues were nonetheless raised that require further attention. Ten (of the 11) criminalised women and all the support workers cited recent occurrences where the duty of care to imprisoned women had been compromised or failed. The concerns raised included: the

circulation of illicit drugs in the prison⁴; the disproportionate and discriminatory classification of women to maximum-security; limited access to adequate health care services; the frequency of self-harm and drug overdose and the impacts of bearing witness to these events; access to useful therapeutic and support programs; and failure to protect against inter-prisoner standover tactics and violence. Such concerns have been reported elsewhere (Victorian Parliamentary Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee 2010; Cerveri et al 2005; EOCV 2006) and have significant implications for the short- and long-term wellbeing and safety of women (Liebling and Maruna; Sheehan et al 2007). Given this, there is a need for greater transparency with regards to conditions in Victorian prisons.

In the interviews, however, we focused less on conditions and more on the impact of imprisonment. Helen has served multiple sentences that total 10 years. It was Helen's view that drug addiction separates criminalised women from mainstream society, locating them in a place where criminalisation and incarceration are simply an extension of their dislocation:

They're all imprisoned... Once you are on drugs you are in prison in itself, so when you're in jail you're in another prison.

Helen's comments allude to a broader view that for the majority of women, prison serves as an extension of the social isolation, structural disadvantage, and institutionalisation experienced throughout their lives. Support workers and criminalised women characterised incarceration as further experiences in lives already marred by multiple traumatic events and the struggle for survival. However, the tension raised in this research is that imprisonment can both prevent *and* reproduce trauma and harm. While many of the participants recounted punitive institutional experiences, all of the criminalised women and support workers we interviewed recognised prison as providing a 'home':

It's weird... when you're in there, I've seen girls, they love it. They go back and back and back, that's their home, that's all they know. They go out and do an armed robbery just to do another 5 years. *Helen*

[For girls from] the sad poor bracket... [prison is] better for them. As [I've] said before, it's saved people's lives. And if they're living on the streets, or whatever, now they've got a home – a warm home with 10 of their friends. You know, beautiful dinners every night, steaks and fish, whatever, you know. Amazing food. That's why everyone gets so fat in there. *Kate*

While for Beth, prison was the only escape from domestic violence:

[My offence was] drug-related, but I guess I could've not went into jail, like appealed and maybe could've got something else... but I wanted to leave the domestic violence and the lifestyle and that was my way out..... [Going to prison,] that's how I got out of it [the relationship].... He wouldn't let me escape.

All of these accounts resonated with Julie's argument, as a prison support worker for over a decade, that imprisonment in many instances can prevent significant harm. It was consistently reported that prison provides separation from hardships faced on the outside including, reducing access to drugs⁵ and providing a reprieve from hardships associated with

⁴ We would note that recently an officer at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre, one of two women's prisons in Victoria, was charged with a number of drug-related offences, including taking contraband into a prison and trafficking heroin and amphetamines (ABC 2010).

⁵ Though we note that this does not mean drugs are not available in Victorian women's prisons, but that they may be less easily available and/or of a different quality than that which they access on the street. Indeed, one

poverty and abusive relationships. This is reflected through Kate's story, a young woman who was imprisoned for a first time drug-related offence. Kate reported that her two-year sentence served to curb her escalating drug problem and chaotic lifestyle:

It gave me a reality check [laughs], you know [to reflect on the fact that]... I'm in this place with all these people that... do these horrible things... It gave me time away... from the drug... in a way it was kind of a safe house... I [had] always worked and always used the drug. I stole a lot of money from work and things like that. I had no choice though, because I had to survive, I had to pay my rent, I needed my drug, there wasn't [anywhere to go]... you can't get into rehab and if you can, who's going to pay the rent?... Whereas, prison was just a clean break. It gave me time away. I'm so glad that I [went to prison]... because who knows what [would have happened], I mean I probably would have had a hell of a lot more convictions... because your drug habit just gets worse and worse. *Kate*.

Of the criminalised women we interviewed, Kate was one of two who had only been imprisoned once. However Kate identified the continuing support of her volunteer support worker Aileen rather than imprisonment itself, as the main reason she had not returned to prison:

I've always kind of thought I was one of the lucky ones because I had [Aileen]. I had such a strong support [and] that's how I've made it through and I truly believe that if it wasn't for [Aileen] I wouldn't have made it through. I've relapsed and I've done more crime.... I haven't done enough crime to take me back to prison and I think it's because I've had [Aileen] there ... she's just been there and supported me the whole way.

While Kate's comments also raise issues related to post-release experiences (which we discuss later), our concern here is to highlight that, like Kate, participants often identified prison as a reprieve or 'break' but did not suggest that the potentially positive outcomes from this 'break' were a reflection of any inherent rehabilitative qualities of the institution itself. Prison is the only option rather than a desired option. This is illustrated in Carol and Liz's conversation (the only group interview that was conducted), where prison is not a safe haven but a *safer* place:

Liz: Well [the attitude while you're inside] it's "I cannot wait to get out the door" but once you're out that door, it's a scary feeling.

Carol: And a lot of women are so institutionalised that although they might be excited about getting out and they're pissed off about coming back in, they're actually happier when they are in there...

Liz: 'Cause they know they've got a roof over their head, they don't have to work; they don't have to pay board; they don't have to pay electricity, gas whatever; they get fed...

Carol: But then they still have to put up with all the shit – the rest of the shit that goes along with it... But sometimes it is a relief. I know there's been times when I've been running hectic out there when I've just thought "Oh my God, I wish I could just get pinched and go to jail for a break." You know? [Laughing]. And as luck would have it, you know [laughing].

The findings demonstrate how the absence of adequate support mechanisms in the community renders imprisonment the only 'alternative' option – the only way to interrupt cycles of abuse, addiction and/or financial pressure that leads to lifestyles focused on

participant challenged the notion of prisons being 'drug free' and felt that selling this idea to the community, particularly the idea that women leave prison 'drug free', tends to result in women being blamed for 'returning' to drug use when they return to the community.

survival. Reflecting the complexity of the potential positives and negative effects of imprisonment was the difficulty both groups of women (support workers and criminalised women) had in articulating the damaging *and* affirmative potential of the relationships and communities forged by women in prison. This sense of community is absent on the outside and provides a rich source of mutual respect and support among women. However such a 'community' can prove paradoxical in its nature. This is reflected in Carol's identification that while prison provides a reprieve from violent, repressive relationships on the outside, it often provides a space for fostering new, similarly dysfunctional relationships:

Well... the biggest thing is those incredible statistics about how many women have been victims of domestic violence, sexual abuse, that type of thing. When you look at that, you know, is it any wonder we're in prison? But it's a perfect opportunity while we are away from the domestic violence – and that's actually the one thing where women can gain strength in prison, because away from that domestic violence they can sort of come out of themselves and regain a bit of self-esteem [and] self respect, but not in the prison environment. It's a very rare woman that can do it in a prison environment because the system becomes the abusive partner when you get to prison.... And often... women can be pretty nasty to each other too.... often women who have been abused, when they come into a situation where they're no longer being abused, some women often become abusers of... more vulnerable women than themselves... [who] get stood over for their pills and all that kind of shit. *Carol*

Carol's comments highlight the inappropriateness and indeed danger, of utilising a prison setting to meet ends that could be better served through community-based initiatives designed to address structural disadvantage and marginalisation. The idea of the prison as a reprieve or refuge highlights the desperate conditions experienced by criminalised women in the community. Moreover, it reveals that criminal justice responses are increasingly utilised as solutions to complex social problems that could be more appropriately addressed through well-resourced social welfare and support services, public housing, health and education provisions. Critically, in discussing the impact of imprisonment, all participants recognised that while the relationships between women inside can prove problematic, the ways in which the prison institution is dehumanising and infantilising in its treatment of women is the source of great harm. Carol and Megan's words below echo the findings of a large body of critical feminist scholarship (cf Easteal 2001; Hampton 1993; Scraton and Moore 2005; Cerveri et al 2005; Carlen 1998):

... if there were effective programs in prison [maybe it would do some good]. If prison was an environment that actually helped people, rather than deskilled them and dehumanise them. [But]... the system itself is designed to make you compliant. That's one of the boxes they tick, you know, is whether you've been compliant or not.... And... for a woman compliance... means submissiveness, you know?I think it's different for men. They don't infantilise men the way they do us. They treat us like children, and they treat us like deviant, abhorrent children, you know. *Carol*

Inside the prison world... the theory's right, to give direction and support and help to any prisoner, whether it be men or women, it's just that the practice isn't quite right. *Megan*

What we can identify overall in relation to imprisonment is that it often serves as, at best, a 'stop gap' in women's lives and that the institution can directly (through prison management processes) and indirectly (though creating/enabling particular types of communities and behaviours within the institution amongst women) produce further harm and trauma. These discussions raise concerns about the short- and long-term impacts of institutionalisation and women's survival post-release.

Trauma and Women's Lives Post-Release

As stated above, a critical finding in this research is participant's consistent identification of multiple traumatic events in women's pre-, during and post-imprisonment lives. Moreover, indicators of profound structural disadvantage such as substance abuse, homelessness and ill health also featured in discussions. These findings reflect the existing literature which is replete with lists of challenges that confront women upon release, including housing, unemployment, managing addiction and other mental and physical health issues, problems gaining access to and/or custody of children, debt and financial insecurity. However, our research brought to the fore the emotional underpinnings of women's accounts of survival that may or may not be connected with, and influenced by, these practical and measurable factors⁶. The participants frequently referred to loneliness, body image and motherhood as interconnected emotional issues they have struggled with. Such issues are little recognised within matrices that seek to define post-release journeys in terms of demographic factors, indicators of social disadvantage and recidivism rates. In discussing the 'moment' of release and the weeks, months and years that followed, as we examine below, emotion was a central feature of women's post-release narratives alongside the structural and tangible challenges they faced.

Confronting the 'Unfinished Business'

Women's post-release lives rarely diverge from their pre-imprisonment lives. In this research women explained how release (for 9 of 11 participants release has been experienced multiple times) comprises a bittersweet prospect where they are forced to confront unresolved issues on the outside, in the midst of attempting to re-establish themselves in the community. Carol characterises this process as coming to grips with 'unfinished business', emphasising that imprisonment fails to address the ongoing cycle of addiction, self harm and the survivalist mindset:

You know... I often think that when you go to prison, it's unfinished business. Just because you've gone to prison, you're not suddenly cured of your addiction. I know a lot of women who have convinced themselves... because they've done the drug and alcohol program 18 times that... they're going to be cured. And within two weeks, she'll fall an alcoholic again, you know, into the pills, into the goey and what.... I [just] think it's like unfinished business.... You're in the middle of what you are doing... and all of a sudden it stops. *Carol*

The majority of the participants, including Fiona, echoed Carol's analysis, recognising that while imprisonment may provide 'timeout' in the short-term, it ultimately fails to address in any meaningful or long-term way the systemic causes underpinning social problems such as chronic substance abuse:

I can count on one hand the amount of times I've thought that a prison stint might be good for someone in 10 years of doing... this type of work [but] for [one lady I work with] it's the only time she isn't chronically abusing substances. In saying that, what she's going into is not treatment it's just a circuit breaker from what she's doing. So... in one way you can see that

⁶ In raising the issue of emotion we are mindful to avoid reproducing gender normative stereotypes and assumptions about women that at times underpin processes of criminalisation and imprisonment. These stereotypes can result in women being denied agency and being treated as irrational and lacking the capacity to make decisions and contribute to society. Rather we recognise emotion as a central feature of women's struggles to maintain multiple roles and demands placed on them, for example, as mothers, prisoners, parolees, patients and employees.

that's potentially a good thing. It gives her some time to get proper assessments done to get into place some good kind of stuff for when she gets out. But it certainly isn't dealing with the issue.... it's just like a forced detox but it actually isn't dealing with the reasons why she uses. It isn't dealing with the fact that her dad was abusing her since she was two. *Fiona, Support Worker.*

As Fiona further explains, women's histories (particularly legacies of trauma) are effectively ignored and unaddressed and this can place them at greater risk of harm upon release:

[There's no]... addressing the traumas and in fact she comes out higher risk because she's made a lot more mates who can get her a lot better stuff. She's coming out to homelessness. She's potentially lost her supports that were in place before she went in and she's coming out with absolutely no chance... of having [been] rehabilitated through that time. It is a... physical break for her body... a little rest but that's it. There's no... real rehabilitation in it whatsoever. *Fiona, Support Worker.*

Fiona's observations are reflected through women's accounts regarding preparations for release. Kate, for example, related that doubts and fears can intensify in the weeks and days preceding release:

Getting released from custody is hard enough [to think about] because you're going back into the unknown....You're just [wondering] how's everyone going to take you or see you, or handle you from now [on]. *Kate*

Yet as former prisoners and support workers consistently reported, the majority of women talk less about these fears and more about their commitments to life changes. These commitments, however, often come undone in the first hours, days and weeks of being released largely due to the unrecognised and ignored fear and apprehension that Kate articulated, as Liz explains:

...a lot of [women] that get out of prison... they reckon they're not going to use when they get out [but] that's the first thing they do.... [Because] maybe they're... frightened that they've just got out and they need something to... give them a boost, to be able to live on the outside world. Because of being in the prison like for months and months, it's just different. You get out to things that have changed; food's more expensive... just lots of things like that.... [W]hen you get out it's very hard to live back in the real society...it's not easy leaving prison and going back on the outside to the normal world... That's why people turn straight to drugs... because they get... out of prison and they've come out to the real world and they like to be stoned, [because they don't know] how they can fit in.... You're frightened when you leave And I mean a lot of people have got nothing to get out to, no family you know, they probably have family but they don't have anything to do with them. *Liz*

Liz's reflections highlight the myriad hardships and the 'unfinished business' of familial and social dislocation women face upon release. Another common finding amongst the women who had experienced multiple periods of incarceration was to find themselves repeatedly facing the 'unfinished business' of relationships characterised by domestic violence. For example, Lillian told us of multiple prison sentences broken by repeated and aggravated episodes of domestic violence at the hands of multiple partners. These findings reveal that little has changed in the (almost) 10 years since Easteal's (2001) Australian research on women and imprisonment concluded that:

"most female ex-inmates' lives will continue in much the same way they did in the past. Nothing has occurred to break the cycle. If they have managed to stay 'clean' during imprisonment, which unfortunately, is unlikely, they still leave with the unhealed wounds that

have festered since childhood. Because violence issues are generally not addressed during their incarceration, they will probably continue in abusive relationships upon release and may perpetuate criminal activities.” (Easteal 2001:109)

The interviews also revealed that—largely due to the limited attention to ‘unhealed wounds’ from previous traumas and the fear of future trauma—many of these criminalised women had an inescapable sense of foreboding regarding uncertain futures no matter how well they were doing post-imprisonment. At the time of interview, for example, Beth had been out of prison for 10 years. Yet despite her story of resilience and survival, she related her persistent fear that she could die at any time: ‘I don’t know what comes tomorrow’. In part we argue that such fears are underpinned by a lifetime of trauma and survival, where it is a question of *when* rather than *if* lives which are tenuously held together will unravel. Critically, the contributions to that unravelling are not necessarily major structural ‘factors’ such as losing a home, but the more mundane realities of boredom and loneliness.

The Hardest Struggle: Loneliness and Boredom

A great deal of research has been devoted to the development and evaluation of post-release services and measurement of post-release outcomes (Sheehan et al. 2007; MCREU 2003). These studies tend to focus on tangible quantifiable ‘outcomes’ such as maintaining housing, accessing unemployment, managing health issues, desistance from crime and reunification with children. However there is less engagement about the impacts and experiences associated with emotional hardships. Women and support workers consistently identified social isolation and boredom as significant contributors to the precariousness of post-release survival. Ella told us that in spite of the suite of available post-release support programs and initiatives, women continue to experience intense isolation:

It’s just difficult... and there’s these little reminders like that every day... silent phones... empty letterboxes and fucking empty cupboards and then what is available? What you can get is some escape from this... for [some] women the drugs take them somewhere else and where’s the incentive to come back? *Ella*.

Women frequently referred to the struggle with loneliness. For example, as Liz explained:

The loneliness is weird ‘cause, like when you’re in jail, all you want is to be alone.... And you get out and you are alone but it’s a different kind of aloneness. You know, like I’m in a flat, I can hear all the noises from the other flats and everything... I still feel like I exist in this separate little universe.

The sense of profound isolation described by Liz encapsulates the imprecise and emotional experience that pathologising or programmatic assessments of post-release ‘success’ are unable to capture. While post-release may be conceived as ‘moving on’ from prison, none of the women we spoke to were able to put prison ‘behind’ them. Even Kate, who managed to maintain employment and remain drug-free for eighteen months, still reflected on her constant struggle with social isolation. She spoke specifically about having to end friendships she made inside yet feeling more disconnected from friends and family in the free community. Indeed, Kate nominated loneliness and boredom as the critical hardships experienced post-release:

[The] number one [challenge] is boredom [and] loneliness. The drugs will always be there for you. You don’t feel alone once you’ve had drugs. I would say definitely boredom and loneliness.... because when you get out if there’s one thing you know, [it’s] that you can’t

hang out with all the friends that you've always known, so you're lonely. You are alone... If you are not at your appointments, you're alone... You're thinking... *Kate*

Many former prisoners disclosed that 'loneliness is the killer' (Carol), whereby post-release deaths are commonly the result of accidental overdoses where drug use occurs within the context of boredom and loneliness. Despite commitments when released about going 'straight', many women identified that social isolation led them back to familiar comforts, most often drug use. As Liz disclosed:

When I got out like I went home to just an empty house, on my own.... Basically... [the] hard part... for me... getting out [of prison] is loneliness... And [having] nothing to do, boredom, that's another big one.... And [for me] boredom [often means]... I go back towards drugs, pills or heroin or speed. *Liz*

Emotions such as loneliness, unhappiness and fear are not necessarily a reflection of clinical depression, but were common post-release experiences reported by women. Indeed Helen described that she knew many women who had died:

... of a broken heart, died of their kids being taken, or they couldn't live up to someone's expectations. That's what kills you. It's not the drug, yes the drug is the substance that kills you but it's only because your brain has given up on you.

Loneliness and boredom are critical factors because, as reported by women, they comprise dominant features in women's lives in addition to other well-documented post-release hardships such as unemployment, substance abuse, mental and physical ill health, reunification with children, financial crisis and social exclusion. Women's accounts in the *Surviving Outside* research highlight that hardships experienced in prison and post-release present additional layers to legacies of trauma and entrenched social disadvantage and marginalisation that feature throughout the spectrum of criminalised women's lives. Such accounts provide a vital context for understanding the short- and long-term impacts of imprisonment while also raising questions with regards to the adequacy of current post-release support provisions.

Formal Support: Failures of Program Approaches

Corrections and justice agencies across Australia and indeed in the majority of Western nations are committed to post-release service provision, including transitional programs that begin in prison. This burgeoning area of investment has been labelled by Carlen and Tombs (2006) as the "reintegration industry". In this context there appears to be a gulf between commitments to women-centred support provision and implementation.

What was clear in the interviews with criminalised women and some support workers (generally from non-government funded organisations) is that existing formalised mechanisms of support for women are failing. Some women reported that they had been denied assistance or support and conveyed their sense of injustice and abandonment. Adele related one experience of release from maximum security:

They didn't reintegrate me into mainstream before I got out, which is a big thing. So when I got out I was messed up 'cause I went from pretty much no contact, except through speaking through a door grill...through a door, to this big world.

Within days of her release Adele was violently attacked and sexually assaulted by a stranger who she was attempting to 'score' with. The attack illustrates the vulnerabilities and harms associated with the period immediately following release. However, the potential

impact of this experience on Adele's wellbeing and post-release journey is better understood through the prism of her life history. Adele described growing up in a dysfunctional family environment where she had witnessed and experienced domestic violence and abuse. Multiple members of her family had been in and out of prison throughout her childhood due to substance abuse and drug-related crime and her own substance abuse issues led to repeated sentences in prison. Adele disclosed the trauma she experienced in association with the death of her sister who overdosed and died post-release. In short, Adele's personal history and time in prison formed a backdrop for a series of traumas and harms. If we consider Adele's story of abuse and drug use from one experience of release, we can begin to identify that trauma, criminalisation and institutionalisation are ever-present in her life. We argue that such contexts cannot be overlooked in the provision of post-release support frameworks, policies and initiatives. Adele's story of survival is a lifelong story of survival and her motivations and responses to situations today is informed by that experience. To simply focus on 'factors' that contribute to women's post-release success and/or to women's death, when leaving prison renders their life journeys as immaterial, ensuring that many concerns and challenges prior to imprisonment remain unaddressed.

Challenging dominant responses also includes recognising that community assumptions about appropriate support require more informed understandings of women's lives and experiences. For example, Megan's post release experience highlights that traditional support structures are not all that is required. She struggled with addiction and reconnection despite having strong family support:

I relapsed when I first got out, which surprised me more than anyone, because I was so adamant that I would never use ever again. I mean, drugs put me in gaol. It's quite simple, take drugs out of the equation and you know, I had 34 years of a normal life and three years of drugs, and I end up in gaol. It wasn't rocket science for me. But, I relapsed, and I fought it by myself..... But... the boredom was definitely there, and certain people become triggers. *Megan*

In many ways while not in an 'at risk' category, Megan's struggle was a personal and emotional struggle – this is something that contemporary post-release strategies do not address and post-release research does not capture. Different personal battles played a critical role in the trajectories of the criminalised women we interviewed. The battles they relayed comprised the unfinished business when a woman is imprisoned and which is (often) further damaged or entrenched as a result of incarceration. This reinforces the importance of challenging structured, factor-based quantitative research into post-release 'outcomes' that de-contextualises women's lived experience.

Conclusion

Given the unprecedented increases in women's imprisonment rates in Victoria, Australia and internationally, there is an urgent need for critical research agendas and a renewed focus on women's criminalisation, imprisonment and post-release survival. In this paper we have sought to illustrate the importance of foregrounding trauma (and emotion) as equally important as structural disadvantage and social exclusion in examining women's criminalisation and cycles of institutionalisation. The *Surviving Outside* research has created a space for the emergence of women's personal accounts of criminalisation, imprisonment and survival – accounts irrevocably marred by trauma. There are three key findings we wish to reiterate. First, these accounts emphasise the centrality of traumatic legacies, where trauma is not a psychological state or condition but is defined by experiences including:

witnessing violence; experiencing violence; and the onset of separation, loss and grief. We understand and define trauma broadly, as a fluid and crucial feature coupled with socioeconomic disadvantage that underpins women's criminalisation and institutionalisation. The second finding builds on this understanding of trauma to highlight that understanding imprisonment as the defining traumatic incident or as a causal factor determining women's post-release trajectories is too simplistic. Instead we argue there is a need for further research to critically examine the ways that criminal justice processes, institutional conditions and existing support mechanisms can effectively magnify trauma, reinforce women's marginalisation and lock women into a cycle of criminalisation and imprisonment. Finally, we draw attention to the ambiguities of imprisonment experienced by women both as punitive and a reprieve from hardships and chaotic lifestyles on the outside. In this sense, the fact that the prison comprises an 'escape' or 'way out' is indicative of the lack of social welfare infrastructure and support initiatives in the community to address extreme structural disadvantage and social exclusion. The nexus between trauma and women's criminalisation and imprisonment is a complex one, but in order to establish appropriate and useful support mechanisms we argue it is critical to acknowledge the broader harms of institutionalisation and the need to develop responses that are informed by women's lived experiences.

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