

# WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES AFTER INCARCERATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

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## **Abstract**

*This study examines the experiences of women in South Africa after incarceration. Using in-depth interviews, the experiences that came after the imprisonment of ten female 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 family breakdown and the psychological effect of imprisonment 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 targets of stigma and discrimination from their families, in particular, and the society, in general. Non-cordial relationships among family members which resulted in the breakdown of the families of some of the participants were reported. The psychological effect of imprisonment was reported by some of the participants; this was reflected in the inability of this category of women to make friends and 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.*

**Keywords:** *Discrimination, imprisonment, family breakdown, female ex-prisoners, general strain theory, incarceration, prison, South Africa, stigma, unemployment, women.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

This paper will examine the experiences that the participants of this study deemed significant after their imprisonment in South Africa. These experiences include unemployment, the stigma that results from imprisonment, family breakdown and the psychological effect of imprisonment on female ex-prisoners as identified by the participants of this study. For the purpose of this paper, the words “incarceration” and “imprisonment” are used interchangeably.

## **2. Methodology**

This study is a part of a larger research which examined women’s experiences before, during and after incarceration in South Africa. A qualitative research design was adopted for this study using in-depth interviews to explore a variety of the participants’ experiences after their imprisonment. A total of ten female former prisoners who had relevant experiences in relation to the topic of this paper were selected from the larger study. The interviews lasted between thirty minutes and five hours.

The initial participants were obtained using two lists from the Department of Correctional Services. The first list contained a list of the names of female prisoners who were released within the last five years, while the second list was made-up of the names of female prisoners who were soon-to-be released as at the time of this study, as well as, their release dates. Using snowball sampling, I located more participants by asking the initial participants to introduce me to other female ex-prisoners who were also willing to be interviewed. The use of the non-probability sampling method of snowball sampling was appropriate because 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 female ex-prisoners in South Africa because a random sampling method was not used.

## **3. GENERAL STRAIN THEORY AND FEMALE CRIME**

The theoretical basis of this study is General Strain Theory (GST). GST was chosen for this study because it provides an understanding of why females engage in crime. Although GST is a general theory of criminality (Piquero & Sealock, 2000: 454), it is appropriate for this study because it provides invaluable insights into female offending. GST suggests that females experience different types of strains, and that these strains generate negative emotions in them. The theory posits that the negative emotions that females feel as a result of these strains culminate in criminal or noncriminal acts. GST sheds more light on the gendered responses of females to circumstances which make them engage in crime.

Specifically, GST posits that strain generates negative emotions that provide motivations for criminal acts as a behavioural coping strategy. Thus, the more distressed an individual gets, the more likely it is for the individual to engage in crime (Jang, 2007: 523-524). Going by this proposition of GST, since women are more stressed than men (Broidy & Agnew, 1997; Lundberg & Frankenhaeuser, 1999: 142; 278; and Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001: 173) one would expect women to commit more crime than men. However, the opposite is the case as empirical literature, for over a century, reveals that men have higher rates of crime than women (Lombroso & Ferrero, 1910; and Painter & Farrington, 2004: 6). Broidy and Agnew (1997: 280) support the contention that females are subjected to more strain than males. The authors note that this is even more so when one considers that the literature on stress often overlooks stressors that may be of special relevance to females, such as sexual abuse, abortion, gender-based discrimination, child care problems, and the burdens associated with nurturing others (Broidy & Agnew, 1997: 278).

Although it has been argued that men are focused on financial and material success, it has also been noted that women are becoming increasingly concerned with financial success, but with many women being unable to achieve this goal of financial success (Broidy & Agnew, 1997: 289). In my opinion, this observation, coupled with the preponderance of female-headed households in South Africa, breakdown in intimate relationships and the feminisation of poverty (Ratele, Shefer & Clowes 2012: 554; Shisana, Rice, Zungu & Zuma, 2010: 39), exacerbate the strain on South African women and may be contributing to the increasing female crime statistics in South Africa. Broidy and Agnew (1997) and Mann (1984) support this argument by pointing out that financial problems constitute a fundamental source of strain for female offenders and that this strain plays a contributory role in the crimes they commit. This category of female offenders experience difficulty in securing jobs before their imprisonment and, hence, they resort to illegal sources of income (Mann, 1984: 96; Broidy & Agnew, 1997: 289–290).

In addition to the above mentioned strain, this study revealed that women experience other strain after incarceration. Some of these strains are unemployment, stigma and discrimination, as well as family breakdown and the psychological effect of imprisonment after they were incarcerated. Recidivism can result from the combination of one or more of the above mentioned strain if the difficulty that some female offenders experience in getting employment before their incarceration persists on their release from prison.

#### **4. THE EFFECTS OF FEMALES' IMPRISONMENT**

The effects of imprisonment are often felt by female prisoners long after their release from prison. Carlen (1990: 17) observes that “a woman’s experience of imprisonment crucially affects her prospects on release ... too often that experience is damaging and debilitating”. A myriad of problems arise from the incarceration of females, particularly within the families. Family instability often precedes the incarceration of some females and imprisonment may, in turn, exacerbate this instability. 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 their pain of separation from their mothers. It is also believed that there is an increased likelihood that these children will be incarcerated and abuse and neglect their own children.

The imprisonment of mothers usually result in their children being cared for by extended family members although this often means a lack of access to the mental health and social services which would have been provided for these children if they were looked after in government controlled foster homes. However, the fear of losing custody of their children often means that female prisoners are not prepared to relinquish the care of their children to the state prior to their incarceration (Sarri, 2009: 301–303).

On their release from prison, female ex-prisoners are often eager to be reunited with their children and other family members but are unaware of the emotional roller coaster (anger and anxiety) and turmoil which their children experience when their mothers return to them. These negative feelings on the part of the children are fuelled by the sense of desertion that they felt when their mothers were incarcerated and/or the confusion as regards 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. The fact that most female "offenders are released with nothing except the clothing they are wearing and a bus ticket" compounds the experiences of female prisoners after imprisonment (Sarri, 2009: 309).

## 5. FINDINGS

The findings of this study are discussed in the next three sections.

### 5.1 UNEMPLOYMENT

One of the most significant post-incarceration experiences of the participants of this study was the difficulty in securing employment after their incarceration. In fact, the majority of them were unemployed at the time of the study. Margaret 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 ...*

Juliet, Emily, Gail and Lebohang all reiterated Margaret's view. According to Juliet:

*It's difficult getting a job because of my criminal record – possession of drugs, GBH [Grievous Bodily Harm], armed robbery...you know. 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.*

Micaylah was able to go back to the type of work that she did before her incarceration, but she admitted that she was more fortunate than most female former prisoners. Micaylah stated:

*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 fact that I knew a lot of people in my kind of job and because they heard my story and they were willing to give me a second chance helped me get a job soon after my release on parole. 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.*

The participants who were able to become gainfully employed after incarceration often took lower paying jobs than those which they had before their incarceration. This is as a result of their criminal records because both the private and public organisations are wary of employing them.

## **5.2 STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION**

Female former prisoners often experience stigma as a result of their criminal records, especially when they have to disclose this information to other people, for example, when looking for a job. Valerie explained the discrimination that she experienced in her search for a job after her incarceration:

*I once went to this funeral parlour ... So; they ask question, 'Have you been to prison before?' and I told them 'Ja'. 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. He was so aggressive towards me. 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.*

The communities in which the female ex-prisoners live often stigmatise them for having been imprisoned. Lebohang stated:

*[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. Having to keep your head afloat, it's just tough. Having to face people again and trying to do things better is difficult.*

Gina, Margaret and Melissa shared Lebohang's opinion. Gina and Melissa stated:

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

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

Cecelia spoke about the stigmatisation that she experienced as a result of being an ex-prisoner. She maintained that, despite the fact that female ex-prisoners have been punished for the crimes that they committed by incarcerating them; society continues to punish them after their incarceration by stigmatising them.

*You know what? ... some people outside [prison], when you say "I'm a 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 you ... (Cecelia).*

In addition to the stigma that is experienced from the community, Juliet related her experience of stigma from her family members.

*It's a whole new world [after imprisonment]. It's like a different place...Some people are judging you, calling you names. I coped very well because I had my mother next to me all the time. She was there for me all these times up until today. Ja. 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, but I don't care, as long as I have got my mother.*

Freda also suffered stigmatisation from her family after her imprisonment:

*... the youngest one [her son; her youngest child], when we fight, 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 my mistake. It's finished now. I don't want to talk about it again". You know, when they 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" (Freda).*

Gail 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 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, she will kill us.*

The stigma that some female ex-prisoners experience is often immense. This is also reflected in their being denied jobs by most members of society. The stigma that results from not being accepted by certain family members and society often results in some female ex-prisoners reverting to their old habits by socialising with the kind of people with whom they socialised before they were imprisoned. This adoption of old habits and interactions with old friends, even when they are the wrong crowd, increases the likelihood of recidivism among females. One of the major reasons why some female ex-prisoners go back to their old friends (who may have played a significant role in the crimes they committed) is the fact that they feel welcomed and not judged by these people. It takes major effort on the part of those former female prisoners who did not go back to their “old” circle of friends after incarceration to do so. In some cases where friends were not the enabling factors in the incarceration of the participants, these friends did not want to associate with an ex-prisoner. Hence, although some of the participants of this study wanted to continue relating with the friends that they had prior to their imprisonment, such friends avoided them because of their imprisonment history.

Despite the challenges that the participants of this study encountered after incarceration, some of them expressed their desire to not allow their incarceration mar their lives by choosing to turn away from a life of crime and do something worthwhile with their lives. Indeed, some of the participants have done this by choosing to go back to school and to stay away from situations that expose them to crime. For example, after her incarceration, Nomsa obtained a nursing degree and has enrolled to study medicine; while Lebohang is currently studying towards obtaining her BCom (Bachelor of Commerce) degree.

### 5.3 FAMILY BREAKDOWN AND THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF IMPRISONMENT ON FEMALE EX-PRISONERS

The negative effect of incarceration is so intense that it often splits families and results in irreparable rifts in familial relationships. Freda attributed the breakdown of her marriage and her eventual divorce from her husband to her imprisonment, as well as the disintegration of the emotional ties that she shared with her children:

*I was happily married with my husband, two children [before incarceration] 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 fraud], 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. Even though there is a social worker, there is a psychologist, but there is nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing they can do for you...while I was in prison, about a year before I got released, we decided that we gonna divorce. We just gonna be friends. I said to him, "Go ahead and do it [divorce her]", and he said, "No, I will wait till you come out"... 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 three and a half years, and now you want to come and tell" (Freda).*

Coupled with the strain that imprisonment imposes on the relationship between the female former prisoners and their family members, the fear of being stigmatised makes it even more difficult for female ex-prisoners to adjust to life outside prison. Micaylah explained:

*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. She and I became estranged after this argument. We 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 on parole, 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.*



Emily discussed one of the impacts of imprisonment on her daily life and routine:

*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.*

Mercy's socialisation with other people was affected by her imprisonment.

*I have never been able to talk freely about my prison ordeal with anybody until recently when I spoke to a close male friend. I poured out my mind to him. Apart from this man, you are the only one that I have spoken to about my prison experience ... 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 (Mercy).*

Lebohng continued to display the behaviour that she learnt in prison in her daily life.

*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 (Lebohng).*

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

*My family lives in Pretoria, and I was in Nelspruit, so I didn't see my family, not even once, but my boyfriend was staying in Nelspruit, so I see him about once or twice a week. My husband came to visit me about two or three times. The biggest thing that happened to me is that he [her boyfriend] died while I was in prison [She started crying at this point. I switched off the recorder, consoled her and asked if she wanted to take a few minutes before we continued with the interview, or whether she wanted to stop. She sobbed for a while, and then said it was okay for us to continue.] When I left prison, I was supposed to go and live with him 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 did give 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 (Melissa).*

Unemployment, 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 on their release from prison. Some of them found the stigmatisation and discrimination that they experienced from their family members and society particularly disturbing as they did not expect to continue to be “punished” after their imprisonment. The high unemployment that was mentioned in the participants’ narratives is reflective of that their colleagues as well and can keep females in a vicious cycle of crime.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Although the female offenders only are incarcerated and experience the pains of being confined, their family members also suffer both during and after the incarceration of these females as some of the effects of imprisonment are often shared outside of the prisons by members of the female offenders’ families. In order to minimise the effects of female imprisonment, particularly on those people who are related to the female prisoners, the focus of incarceration should shift from punishment to the rehabilitation of female offenders with emphasis on alternatives to incarceration, especially for females who have committed non-violent crimes. Effective re-integration of female ex-prisoners, which begins with effective rehabilitation, should be the focus of female prisons so as to reduce the rate of female re-offending and also the possibility of the children of former female prisoners becoming offenders themselves.

In line with the strain that GST propose women experience, some incarcerated females and female ex-prisoners often experience additional strain in their lives. These strains are believed to facilitate the commission of certain types of crimes. If not effectively handled, the strain that some women undergo after imprisonment in South Africa coupled with those that they experience as women can make them prone to recidivism. It emerged from the interviews with the participants that imprisonment causes and also exacerbates many forms of strain which continue even after incarceration. Re-offending is, thus, a likely result of imprisonment.

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## Notes on contributor

Caroline Agboola is a doctoral student in the department of Sociology at the University of South Africa (UNISA), South Africa. Her research interests include gender and crime, women and children, and qualitative research methods.

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