

Parole hustle: A preliminary study on the lived experiences of females serving parole in Nelson Mandela Bay

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Abstract

Purpose

This paper aims to shift from the male offender perspective in attempts to explore the stories and lived experiences of five females on parole in Nelson Mandela Bay, as most correctional research in South Africa focuses on the male offender experience. The experiences of females are largely ignored both in terms of reform and in research, and while only a few South African studies on female criminality have emerged, little is known about the impact of incarceration and reintegration on their livelihoods.

Design/methodology/approach

This paper makes use of an ethnographic approach as the narrative follows the complex realities of females on parole to include their voice, depth and experience in the debate within the parole experiences measure framework. This study made use of five individual interviews and observations, which were complemented by existing literature.

Findings

This paper provides insights on the experiences, vulnerabilities, challenges, fears and concerns of females on parole and the relative social costs of their incarceration. The experiences allow for a deeper understanding of the shades of their experiences of powerlessness, gender-specific sexualisation and exploitation, economic vulnerability and destitution and social alienation and exclusion which uniquely influences behavioural and emotional deficits.

Research limitations/implications

Because the number of females on parole in Nelson Mandela Bay is few, this study could only interview five female offenders. Yet, as this study is ethnographic in nature, it offers a deep understanding of these five female offenders.

Practical implications

This research offers an insight into the social ills faced by female on parole. This work highlights the effects of incarceration are often felt by females long after their release since their experience of imprisonment affects their future prospects, damaging and debilitating. This paper suggests self-reclamation that could lead to positive reactions towards rehabilitative and reintegration. This research opens up the larger debate and does not offer tangible recommendations.

Originality/value

This paper fulfils an identified need to study parole amongst female offenders.

Keywords: rehabilitation, parole, female offenders, correctional facilities, female criminality, recidivism

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Introduction

Although in the past two decades there has been a large global call to action in women-centred criminal research, sentenced females are largely ignored in the South African debate on human rights, sentencing practices, and correctional reform. Further, as most of the research in South African corrections focuses primarily on the male offender, the needs of incarcerated women have been largely neglected in terms of reform programmes and services from a research perspective (Fourie & Koen, 2018; Dastile, 2017; Manaleng, 2014; Luyt & du Preez, 2010). That is, there is limited knowledge about the profile, nature, contributing factors, and experiences of females incarcerated in South African correction facilities. Only a few, and far between, studies in the country have emerged and, thereby, give a narrow understanding of female criminality (Steyn & Booyens, 2017; Haffejee, Vetten & Greyling, 2006). Women's inclusion in critical and substantive engagement is sadly overlooked even though the experiences of females are remarkably different from those of male offenders. It has been reported by van Zyl Smith and Dunkel that there is no systematic study of the imprisonment of women in South Africa (Van Zyl Smit & Dunkel, 2015). Yet, their punishment, rehabilitation, and reintegration continue to be based almost entirely on the research of male offenders (Artz & Rotmann, 2015).

There is a need to shift from the male focus and highlight the reality of incarcerated women as little is known about their lived experiences and the impact of incarceration on their livelihoods. With support from the National Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences, this preliminary study attempted to explore female-specific experiences with a deeper focus on their experiences while on parole. These experiences are essential considering the current state of affairs within corrections in South Africa since the corrections population is not constant and fluctuates daily as newly convicted women are imprisoned and others released, either on parole or to serve sentences of correctional supervision. The study, conducted in 2021, adopted an embedded approach to explore and examine the lived experiences of punishment, rehabilitation, and reintegration of females on parole. Following standard ethical and COVID-19

procedures, the ethnography consisted of interviews with five females on parole to capture the landscape of how their stories were both told and performed.

Punishment, Rehabilitation, and Parole

Incarceration is linked to a highly stressful experience as the atmosphere can produce negative psychological effects that hinder the goals of rehabilitation (Gavin, 2014; Jordan, 2012; Islam-Zwart & Vik, 2004; Blackburn, 1993). The effects are notably harsher for females due to their increased vulnerability, particularly those who have experienced abuse at home and who have dependents (Chen, Lai & Lin, 2014; Douglas, Plugge & Fitzpatrick, 2009; Johnson & Zlotnick, 2008; Mooney, Minor, Wells, Leukefeld, Oser & Tindall, 2008). With the climbing levels of crime in South Africa, much focus has been given to the profiles of those committing the offenses, and women are often described as the victims of crimes and not as the perpetrators (Dastile, 2017). Van der Hoven and Maree suggest that women are generally viewed as the victims of murder, rape, and domestic violence and are ignored as the criminal (Van der Hoven & Maree, 2005). There is very little publicly available information on sentenced South African females. Consequently, the treatment of incarcerated females is not aimed toward their womanhood nature and needs, and gender-specific issues are not a priority for correctional facilities (Steyn & Hall, 2015; Green, Miranda, Daroowalla & Siddique, 2005). The female experience ranges between their livelihood, coping strategies, and survival. Given the social impact of gender and the relative lack of available research, therefore, studies on female experiences of incarceration and the gendered impact of sentencing in South Africa are vitally important.

Furthermore, the effects of incarceration are often felt by females long after their release since their experience of imprisonment affects their future prospects, which is emotionally damaging and debilitating (Fourie & Koen, 2018; Gondles, Maurer & Bell, 2017). Family instability follows incarceration as the absence of a mother has devastating effects on her children. This is noted as one of the most unpleasant experiences of women's incarceration. The separation from their children can create anxiety and stress for women (Fourie & Koen, 2018). The experiences of punishment may include reinforced unemployment, becoming targets of stigma and discrimination, family breakdown, and the psychological effects of imprisonment on women after incarceration (Agboola, 2017). Moreover, some females have been found to view

themselves as helpless and hopeless victims passively responding to oppressive circumstances (Agbolla, 2017). Their responses, shaped by the tendency to define themselves in terms of their motherhood, expressed pain, regret, and sorrow over not being able to be there for their children due to incarceration. Yet, studies have also shown that females felt that good behaviour, continued support towards their children, and their continued efforts to be rehabilitated suggest that they have the ability to do something worthwhile and valuable while incarcerated (Qhogwana, 2017).

As far as rehabilitation is concerned in the South African context, social and economic exclusion go hand in hand. Programmes include psychological, social work, health, skills development, and spiritual care (Murhula & Singh, 2019). Research compiled by Abgoola (2014) on incarcerated South African females provided information about their experiences during the periods before, during, and after imprisonment. The findings indicated that they tended to dwell on this phase of their lives more than any other phase. Their narratives portrayed their lives behind bars as having been traumatic with far-reaching consequences for their lives after their incarceration. The participants also had histories of abuse before their offending behaviours. The findings revealed that female offenders had experienced daunting challenges upon their release from a correctional centre, such as unemployment, stigma and discrimination, family breakdown, and the psychological effects of imprisonment. Additionally, a study by Artz, Hoffman-Wanderer and Moulton (2012) invited females to tell their stories of their path to crime. The women experienced deaths, trauma, childhood abuse, domestic violence, poverty, dislocation, and homelessness. However, their study looked at “pathways” to crime and the experiences of South African women prior to, during, and after incarceration, and not necessarily the lived experience of their punishment and rehabilitation during periods on parole.

Parole provides for the conditional release of offenders into society before they have served their entire sentence. For context, in South Africa, it is referred to as a placement option in the system of community corrections. That is, the offender is released prior to the expiry of his or her sentence, to serve the remainder thereof within the community and subject to specific conditions with which to comply. Thus, parole is intended to enable parolees to live a crime-free and socially-responsible life, be rehabilitated and assist them to reintegrate into their communities (Correctional

Services Act 111, 1998). Offenders do not have a legal right to parole, as it is considered a privilege, and can be granted or denied by the Correctional Supervision and Parole Board or, in the case of inmates sentenced to life imprisonment, by the Minister of Correctional Services. Section 73(1) of the Correctional Services Act states that subject to other provisions of the act, a sentenced offender must remain in a correctional centre for the full duration of their sentence. A study by Hargovan (2015) found that offenders believe that they are by rights permitted to be released on parole if they have participated in a restorative justice programme or process. The study demonstrates the divide between the rehabilitative perceptions of offenders (remorse and co-operation) and that of the public (assurances of desistence). However, if an offender can show that they have been rehabilitated, there is no reason why they should not benefit from parole (as seen in the case of *Motsemme versus Minister of Correctional Services and Others* 2006 [2], Supreme Court of Appeal Judgement 277). The South African parole regime has become complex and confusing as numerous amendments have been made to govern the eligibility of parole (Ballard, 2012).

Parole offers reintegration into society as a measure designed to enable offenders' planned and gradual transition from corrections to life outside, with social, psychological, and other support. However, this reintegration is not an issue that can be resolved by legislation as families, friends, and the community play a fundamental role in assisting the offenders' return to society. Furthermore, this community support role offers support in rebuilding livelihoods (Ndiye, 2014). Yet, the lack of ability to resist or engage critically with oppressive features may impact negatively on reintegration as they re-enter their homes. There is little existing literature on the experiences of females on parole. However, this study allows for such female experiences to be heard. The narratives to follow give further insight and critique into the lived experiences of the women on parole. These narratives combined with past published experiences through literature widen both the debate and issues that are prevalent. Each identified theme homed in on both the tangible and intangible experiences of the participants: centred on reform, family, public appearance, self-worth, motherhood, employment, aloneness, freedoms, violation, community, and forgiveness.

Study framing and design

The research is framed by desistance theory that notes the re-entry period while on parole as being both complex and challenging, thereby making it even more difficult to resume a “normal” life with successful reintegration into their communities (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016; Göbbels, Ward & Willis, 2012). Handling these difficulties will be either facilitators or barriers where the experiences measured quantify the quality of parole during the first weeks of re-entry. That is, better experiences of parole resulted in lower chances of recidivism (Gwynee, Yesberg & Polaschek, 2020). The measures can be broken down in three phases:

1. Primary phase: a gap in criminal behaviour,
2. Secondary phase: long-term period away from crime with the new identity of a ‘changed’ person,
3. Tertiary phase: recognising personal change and a sense of belonging.
(Gwynee, Yesberg & Polaschek, 2020; McNeill, 2015; Maruna & Farrell, 2004)

However, as of yet, this research has only been applied to the lives of male offenders. By framing the complex realities, facilitators and barriers the females faced while on parole in terms of the measures provided by desistance theory, this study hopes to shed light on the women’s reintegration, recidivism and rehabilitation. Thereby voicing the experiences of females on parole and enhancing understanding of the landscape of female criminality, it will contribute to the development of a female orientated desistance theory and encourage further research. Making use of the measured experiences, the unique vulnerabilities, circumstances, inside stories, and views of female offenders on punishment, rehabilitation and parole can be screened, recorded and reported for further investigation so that guiding principles can be recommended in future to adequately address long standing failures of male-oriented social policies to adequately address the needs of female offenders.

Taking on an ethnographic approach, face-to-face interviews assisted in gaining a first-hand, holistic understanding of the experiences of the women serving parole. In the preliminary study, nine questions were asked to initiate the conversation, namely:

1. Tell the story of your conviction.
2. Have you committed this offence before?
3. Have any of your family members been committed of a crime?
4. What is your household like?
5. Why do you think you've committed a crime again?
6. How do you feel about your punishment?
7. Tell me about your rehabilitation experience.
8. Do you think you can be rehabilitated?
9. What is your parole experience?

Although an interview schedule was used to guide the process of data collection, the approach also made allowance for reflection along the interview journey, where the interviewer followed where the respondent took the conversation, allowing for the inclusion of the participant's voice. A limitation of the study is that the sample only consisted of five females who volunteered to participate in it. This was due to the fact that the female population of parolees in South Africa is just over 3% of the total number and that access to females in the research area further limited the sample pool. The participants were chosen purposively since they had to be females (aged between 20 and 60) and on parole.

The qualitative thematic analysis of the data was inductive and centred on identifying key themes in each woman's narrative. The analysis was done by developing a coding scheme and then extracting key quotes to fully develop these themes. All interviews and observations were documented in such a way that they could be transcribed from the field notes into the study. Common or recurring themes were identified to make sense of them in relation to the framework of the preliminary study by reading, re-reading, and coding of the data notes, in order to reflect on the measured experiences. That is, the documentation, reflection and coding method was designed to form a link between the raw data and more abstract, theoretical thinking. Six contrasting themes emerged from the preliminary data:

1. Reintegration and survival
2. Loss and forgiveness
3. Regret and reconciliation
4. Stigma and self-worth

5. Ridicule and development
6. Regulations and freedoms

The discussion consists of direct quotations from participants to capture the diversity and plurality of women's experiences to consolidate the study. As the study is based on preliminary data, suitable recommendations can only be offered in their initial and general form. These recommendations can be found within the discussion of the findings.

A contract of consent (levels of consent from the Department of Correctional Services, the Head of Centre, and the participants themselves) specified how the research was to take place and under what circumstances it would occur. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the offenders. Care was also taken to observe ethical concerns and guidelines to prevent the re-victimisation of participants.

Findings and Discussion

The following portrait of the ethnographies of the women is offered in two parts, namely as a discussion of their lives and as a narrative of their experiences on parole.

The first participant, Michaela, is a mid-thirties woman from the Western Suburbs in Nelson Mandela Bay. She currently lives with her mother and has not seen her children since March 2020 which has been "completely traumatizing" for her. Michaela indicated that she defrauded her company out of one million US dollars between 2010 and 2012. In 2015, she was sentenced to fifteen years. This was her first offense. She was first sent to Kirkwood, but since her sentence was over two years she was moved to East London and then to the Port Elizabeth Correctional Facility. However, in 2020 Michaela was given a special parole dispensation because of COVID-19. Michaela said that being on parole is "self-destructive on its own". She expressed,

As much as my employees, at the time, were the victims; my family and my children were the greatest victims of that. I lost five years of my life with my children. And now I am out on parole and that stress of having a chip, you cannot move forward, you cannot do anything. It's that emotional stress of being out and they put you on your own.

A deep sense of loss, detachment and regret is expressed by the females. The emotive language used signifies time and activity that was lost and not having the ability to regain those particular moments and experiences that could have happened with loved ones, and in particular with their children. Upon these reflections, sentiments expressed are all underpinned by a deep regret amongst the women and in some cases an examination of their conscience. This examination indicates ideas of regaining elements of the past through forgiveness and trying to wrestle with that reality that cannot be acted upon tangibly. The opening up of a conversation brought forward reflections that allowed the women to vocalise their thinking and ultimately start a journey of self-realisation and possible reconciliation with loved ones as the women felt the real victims of their crime were their children. This confirmed the literature from Gavin (2014), and Fourie and Koen (2018) in regard to the experiences being stressful and emotionally damaging when children are involved. The theme of loss and forgiveness allows for reflection that appears to bring adjustment to both thinking and behaviour. The study notes that these considerations are made within the structure of detainment, without the liberal free-thinking values to act out and upon any emotion. Michaela states that she is changing her behaviour and that the loss she felt during incarceration has given her a renewed sense of belonging with her family. To this measure, her parole experiences have seemingly been positive and the possibility of desistance should be high (tertiary phase). She does not have a positive impression of the correctional system in this regard, however:

In my personal opinion, if you think that prison is to reform you, you're very mistaken. It's not going to. The courses that you do, no offense, are not worth the paper that they are written on. And I mean, you can't go to the parole board without those courses, but the facilitators cannot spell. They don't understand.

The function of a correctional centre as a space of rehabilitation is deeply questioned by the female offenders due to both the content and delivery of these psycho-social programmes. Here, as an initial recommendation, the content to meet the gendered needs of the participants needs reevaluation and a co-created implementation plan to be developed as also mentioned by Steyn and Hall (2015). Moreover, it could be said that the participants did not see themselves in the intervention strategies aimed at

“reforming” their behaviour with an ultimate view to inform their ways of thinking. No intervention will strike confidence in any participant if the facilitator is deemed unsuited or even incompetent for the role, especially in a setting that is both institutionalised and with a skewed power dynamic where only the facilitator has the power. Thus, this study confirms Qhogwana’s (2017) stance on rehabilitation needing to be worthwhile to be successful, making the offender a stakeholder in the process. The use of power here is of particular importance amongst the female offenders as they are typically marginalised both in the correctional centre as well as in their communities. The ability to form a group that is effective and cohesive cannot be formed if the players are not equally enrolled as both co-creators and leaders. One of the fundamental purposes of these programmes or interventions, is to enable self-efficacy and the ability to internalise the lessons learned and implement them in real-life situations: that is, while on parole. In furthering the above recommendation, the design of the programmes should aim to assist the women to duplicate their learnings in a real-life setting. If this cannot be implemented in the smallest ways the programme has not met its need, which is a specifically gendered one.

Michaela added that “it’s very different for a woman to be incarcerated compared to men” because women predominantly do not have a “gang mentality”. She reasoned that compared to them there seems to be a relaxation of rules for male offenders who “have cell phones and are able to trade with a currency, which is like cigarettes or something like that”. Michaela stated that she did not have a very good track record when she started with community corrections as she fought with them for hours because at the parole dispensation there was another woman who was on her thirteenth month of a twelve-year sentence who was released on parole, while Michaela had to serve five years before even seeing the parole board. She was released on medium risk, so she was able to leave her house on weekends and could apply for late stays to help her elderly mother. Michaela shared that although it has been difficult, being on parole gives her flexibility in the sense that she can be at home to look after her mother who had a hip replacement.

The second participant, Sivu, is a woman in her thirties from a township in the Nelson Mandela Bay metropole. She has two children and lives with her mother and uncle. She is a repeat offender and has been convicted of theft and possession of drugs

since 2005. Sivu shared that her children are suffering because of her convictions. She said it has been very stressful for her family, but that she does not have a choice sometimes as she needs money to pay for food and rent. However, she did not see how her drug use could also hinder how she provides for her family. While on parole, Sivu shared:

I was a little bit hesitant to come back home this time because I was going to be condemned and crucified all over again. I always said, if you want people on your case, you get divorced. But if you really want people on your case, you go to prison. I came out and went straight to people and said, I'm out say what you want to say. But I'm bombastic like that. I've paid my dues. And those who feel that I owe them apology can contact me and let us talk. People see me in shopping centers and then I remember I was hated. But for my children, it was a hard lesson to learn. I wasn't at bible camp; I committed a crime. I am always questioned if I am a lesbian, or if I am in a gang. Those are like three standard questions that people see in you. So, it's been difficult on parole.

The female offenders expressed a view that they are often on a secondary trial by the public when on parole. The themes of stigma and self-worth, and ridicule and development, suggest that parole is often like going through another trial by public opinion, with vested interest for others' specific and gender stereotype needs, public ridicule, elements of dehumanizing behaviour, and domestic violence. The study specifically considers actions and activities and how they pertain to the gendered female. As such, women have not described their "homecoming" as celebratory and inclusive but rather inquisitory and accusatory. That is, their parole experience is negative compared to how male parolees are re-socialised into society, often as big superstars and icons that are celebrated as noble for having served their time. Extending the findings of Agobobla (2017), this experience of ridicule and consequent reflections of self-worth may deepen the feelings of hopelessness felt among the women. These feelings could serve as the barriers of desistance, holding individuals in the primary phase leading to recidivism.

I know that my family struggled a lot because I had a time limit on when I can socialize. Now people give me anxiety, too many people are in my space. I

think in that regard prison made me selfish. I don't want to socialize. I'm working now and on my CV it's right there that I have a criminal conviction. So the door closes and it's basically up to me to change the public perception. Sivu the criminal to Sivu. I can't do this anymore. I need some stability. I need my self-worth. I was asked what was the one thing that I missed the most. And it cannot be food. It cannot be anything you can touch. The one thing I miss the most is being a person. Your self-worth is directly related to what you bring to your household, what you can do. And as a woman, as a mother.

The correctional centre ecosystem socialises the female offender to become highly individualised, selfish, and very focused to get back on track. This situates the women out on parole with the difficult task of transitioning into an expanded ecosystem with other stakeholders that will require possible input, compassion, and care from the parolee as a woman, a daughter, a mother, a wife, and a breadwinner. This adjustment requires some work to be done by the parolee to both assist their development and their re-socialisation back into society. This pinpoints the theme of reintegration and survival. The understanding of this development and resocialisation could serve as a grounding for recommendations regarding rehabilitation.

The third participant, Emma, is a female in her twenties. She lives with her grandparents as her father passed away when she was thirteen and her mother could not financially support the family of three children. Emma is a repeat offender and has been involved in robberies, hijacking, and kidnapping since 2018. She is currently on parole and said:

I think in the moment when you get out, it becomes a personal thing with the punishment. If anything, you freak out because when I was in prison I was clean from drugs and now your mind starts. It was a good experience in the sense that I got clean. I could think about the people I was running with and the things I was doing. I probably would have ended up dead so for me I'm glad I went to prison. I came back out to the same environment, the same people, the same stuff. You know so, but the parole office is very kind. It's really nice people and they actually like to see people rehabilitate. If they see that you've changed, the parole board makes the decision. So you're serving the rest of this sentence outside on conditions, which means that I'm doing

community service at my nearest police station. I can only go weekly just to add more time because otherwise, I'm going to be cleaning for the next four years.

In line with Johnson and Zlotnick (2008), abuse is a hindering factor in terms of successful rehabilitation. The female parolees have expressed a personal journey of trying to remain sober, often in the same environment that drew them into risk-taking behaviour and criminal activity: that is, the relationship with drugs and their partners. This flaw in the parole system design presents people with limited and unreal rehabilitation options. A wider support system for women could be the beginning of a “new” life that allows a new set of choices and challenges for them. The role of women parolees is specifically challenging when they are meant to mother, support, work, and provide means at different levels where all they know is the environment that placed them in the risk-taking behaviour context in the first place. These challenges suggest that parole is often experienced in a mode of survival, dealing with multiple barriers and themes of regrets and reconciliations. Additionally, society places a set of demands on women that are often not expected of male parolees.

I'm not allowed out of Port Elizabeth. I've got my address, but if I want to move or visit my mom then I must phone to let them know where I am. Some people run away, so I think that they don't want the person to run away. Like I am going to disappear. I can't go to a pub where they sell alcohol. Or any places that make drugs or anything. And then I will immediately get sent back to prison. But then I have to finish the rest of my sentence, which means the next four years I have to finish my sentence in prison.

The women expressed varying forms of restricted freedoms that curtail physical movement, quality of life, and ideological concepts of freedom, that all question established thinking about freedom. The questions felt by the females on parole are presented as a theme of regulation and freedom. The restriction of freedoms allows for limited development and transition into being a full member of society socially, economically, and emotionally. The punishment continues beyond the correctional facility and is served out on a public stage. It is also associated with questioning elements of human dignity in different contexts, for example through the

consequences of cleaning a public facility such as a police station. Additionally, these restricted movements are felt more harshly by women who have children with whom they do not reside in the same household while they are on parole.

Emma further added that she does feel more alone now that she is back home, and she is concerned about how people think of her. However, she is hopeful that people will rather see her in a positive light as she is trying to better herself and praying. She stated that she hasn't been going out and that she doesn't want friends. Yet, she is trying to "shake it off" and is involved in her church. Emma said that "if I go for an interview I am scared, because if they don't know and then find out will they fire me". She added that it is just how you handle it but finding a job has been last on her list as they know what she has done. This experience adds another layer of vulnerability to the work of Chen *et al.* (2018).

The fourth participant, Alyssia, is a female in her twenties from the Northern Areas. She is the eldest daughter with three brothers. She lives with her mother and her mother's boyfriend. She was originally sentenced to two years for theft and was serving parole. However, she claims that her mother's boyfriend abused her to the point where she could no longer walk and as a result violated her parole as she couldn't move for two months. She added that she only stole to provide for her brothers:

Food, clothing, everything, actually. I am now here for parole violating. But it is worse being here than being on parole. When I was on parole at least I had time spent with my friends and family. Here, I don't have that freedom. The rehabilitation was very encouraging. It makes me stronger, more positive and I even gained self-confidence. Then I was told they were going to lock me up again and I ran away for four more months. Then they called my boyfriend and brought me back here.

The system outside of the correctional facility is not necessarily waiting to receive the female parolee nor willing to support them. The structural elements within this gender-biased ecosystem aim to punish and even persecute the women, creating high levels of stress and both emotional and physical conflict. These findings corroborate the

existing literature of how abuse and emotional damage affect the pathways of female criminality. Females are served a double blow with added gendered responsibilities and violence such as taking care of children, looking after the well-being of extended family members, and domestic abuse. Other gendered social, physical, and emotional needs that also need to be met are placed in a pecking order of priorities that the female parolee attends to first before getting the chance to follow through on their conditions of parole. This voices the complexities of desistance amongst women on parole, suggesting that desistance theory may need to be more inclusive and wider in range to consider female criminality. The histories, experiences, vulnerabilities, challenges, fears, and concerns of the women echo the conditions of their incarceration and the relative social costs are voiced in their self-expression and identities (Artz & Rotmann, 2015). These echoes and experiences are said to be woven into a “cloth of many colours, particularities and women’s different historiographies” which reflect their place of belonging and how it shapes and gives meaning to their lives and lived realities of incarceration (Dastile & Agozino, 2019; 24). The experiences can be complex and fluid, with intersecting themes that influence their lives.

Wendy, a forty-year-old coloured female from the Northern Areas, was sentenced to two years for shoplifting. She has one child and now stays with her uncle while on parole. She stressed that she committed the offense out of peer pressure and economic difficulties. She shared:

It is tough out here without a job so I chose the easy way out. But now it is even more difficult coming out and being on parole. My community doesn’t want me for anything but crime now. My community is sometimes dangerous, there is a lot of gangsterism and drugs. It’s freely available. And now I am a criminal, they want me to do more. But I cannot because I will get caught on parole. You know the rehabilitation taught me that to move forward, you have to forgive yourself, which I’m dealing with now, you know, starting with myself, forgiving myself. Before I can expect my family to forgive me I must forgive myself.

The parole process would, in principle, be aligned to both a form of reconciliation and re-socialisation into society. Forgiveness on several levels plays a major role in the

rehabilitation process. Understanding forgiveness, amongst all other emotions, was expressed as a high priority for participants to begin to grapple with. The actions that determine elements of forgiveness could be described under the headings of the self, family, friends, people that have been wronged or offended, and society at large. The women further explored the different processes that are at play in the area of forgiveness as both being cathartic and painful while being in a community that sees them solely as a criminal.

But there is no support for us now out here. We have conditions that are hard to follow through with because we get left alone or we have these influences from the community. My family doesn't know this kind of world. They are disappointed and it is a huge adjustment from being inside. You must remember in there we are in a safe haven; we like in a bubble. And the minute we get out on parole, it's like a whole new ballgame. At least here we are guaranteed our breakfast and our supper, our medication, and outside it's going to be a whole new ballgame because the hustle will be on again, trying to do good with the conditions of our parole.

The stark reality of living without financial, medical, and physical support becomes a challenge that requires the parolee to make plans that might be counter-intuitive to the purposes of the parole's intentions. The women described parole and living on the outside as hustle and filled with challenges that were not experienced whilst in the correctional facility. These risk scenarios force the women to test their willpower and adapt or neglect their newly learned behaviour and parole conditions. The women likened their new experiences to a journey with new sets of challenges that are experienced, often without adequate support.

I always said I'm going to take the good points with me. They taught me how to be patient. And it's sometimes good when your freedoms get taken away from you. You can't rush things. Outside, if I wanted something, I'm going to make a plan, even if it's the wrong plan. But I've learned self-discipline, patience, self-respect.

Parolees experienced unrealistic expectations that are placed on them by society, merely by existing as a gendered body, that is, having to fend for themselves and loved

ones with an inadequate number of weapons in their arsenal. When the odds are against them, previously learned behaviour kicks in as a survival technique and therefore relies on successful risk-taking behaviour that led them to a life of crime in the first place. This indicates a dance between learned behaviour, the status quo, and the danger of being reincarcerated.

Conclusion

Although female offenders represent a small proportion of offenders in South Africa, little is known about their experiences of criminality. Furthermore, reintegration programmes have to date been based on the male offender experience, excluding a gender-sensitive programme altogether. Without such a programme, females are faced with complex barriers while on parole which affect their desistance and recidivism. In acknowledging their voice, females may realise self-reclamation that could lead to positive reactions towards rehabilitation and reintegration, both important for a female offender on parole. This experience is shaped by the themes of reintegration and survival, loss and forgiveness, regret and reconciliation, stigma and self-worth, ridicule and development, and regulations and freedoms. It must be noted that this preliminary research only offers a few general tangible recommendations. As such, future research should examine and extend these preliminary findings through further ethnographic studies on parole amongst females.

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