Executive Summary

WOMEN'S PATHWAYS INTO, THROUGH AND OUT OF PRISON

Understanding the Needs, Challenges and Successes of Women Imprisoned for Drug Offending and Returning to Communities in Thailand

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Thailand imprisons more of its citizens than any other country in South East Asia, with the highest female incarceration rate in the region, and substantial growth in prisoner numbers since the 1990s. Principally, this growth has been compelled by changes in drug law, policy, and criminal justice practice. The government of Thailand has taken a punitive approach to illicit drugs since the 1990s, which has caused Thailand's prison population to rise steeply, with drug offenders being significantly over-represented. Punitiveness has disproportionately impacted women, evidenced by the fact that drug offenders constitute a higher proportion of females than the male prison population.

Recent data show that in 2020 there were 47,926 females incarcerated in Thai prisons. At present, women in Thailand are housed in 107 prison facilities, and 84% of them are 'doing time' for a drug offence. As women's representation in Thailand's prisons grows, so does the number of women who return to society from prison. Thus, one of the challenges confronting Thai society is the successful re-entry of mounting numbers of formerly incarcerated women.

National level re-offending data by gender shows that women released from prison are exceptionally lower than men to be re-incarcerated one, two- and three-years post-imprisonment. For women prisoners released in 2018, 8.6% are re-incarcerated in one year, 14.6% in two years and 17.3% in three years after release.

To date, there have been no assessments of women's re-entry in Thailand. This research aims to bridge this gap by understanding the experiences of Thai women returning to the community after imprisonment.

Research methodology

The aims of this research are to understand the needs, challenges, and successes of women re-entering Thailand society post-imprisonment. Using in-depth interviews and focus groups, we explore women's experiences of offending/criminalisation, imprisonment and re-entry. Utilising the voices of women (imprisoned and formerly imprisoned) and those who support them during incarceration and re-entry (i.e. prison personnel), this study identifies what constitutes re-entry successes and explore the needs/challenges of women returning to the community.

Interviews were conducted with 75 imprisoned women in three women's prisons, along with three focus groups with 16 prison staff. An additional five interviews were completed with women post-release. More specifically, interviews were undertaken with five separate groups of women (figure 1).

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4		Group 5
25 interviews	**25 interviews**	**20 interviews**	**5 interviews**	**+**	**5 interviews**
with women incarcerated in Prison A	with women incarcerated in Prison B	with women incarcerated in Prison C	with recently re-imprisoned women in Prison C		Post-release with women in Group 3

The topics for the interviews and focus groups can be found in figure 2 below:

Pathways into prison

- Childhood experiences
- Adulthood experiences
- Education, employment and economic circumstances
- Health and subtance abuse histories
- Circumstances surrounding their offending/criminalisation
- Prior arrests and terms of imprisonment

Life in prison

- Experiences of imprisonment
- Needs addressed/not addressed in prison
- Pre-release planning

Staff opinions

- Perceptions of women's pathways into prison
- Perceptions of women's needs and experiences in prison
- Perceptions of women's re-entry experiences, needs, challenges and successes

Expectations/ experiences of re-entry

- Definitions of success and how these might/were/are being achieved
- Challenges that might be/ were/are being faced
- Needs and how these might/ were/are being addressed

Descriptive statistics

(i) Women's backgrounds

Mean age

36.5 years

Religion

80% Buddhist

15% Muslim

5% Christian

Education completed

33% primary school

24% lower secondary school

20% upper secondary school

Income source before imprisonment

45% drug dealing

15% shop assistant/sales

11% general labour/factory work

29% others

Table 1: Type of offence

Offence	Number	%
Drug possession for use	18	24
Drug possession for distribution	29	39
Drug distribution	27	36
Driving under the influence of drugs	1	1
Total	75	100

Table 3: Sentence lengths

Sentence lengths	Number	%
6 months - 1 year	2	3
1 - 2 years	17	23
2 - 5 years	48	64
5 - 10 years	7	9
10 - 15 years	1	1
Total	75	100

Table 2: Type of drugs

Type of drugs	Number	%
Methamphetamine (yaba and ice)	73	97
Cocaine	1	1
Cannabis	1	1
Total	75	100

Table 4: Time left to serve

Time left	Number	%
< 1 month	8	11
1 month < 2 months	12	17
2 months < 4 months	26	37
4 months < 7 months	12	17
7 months < 1 year	10	14
1 year < 2 years	2	3
Total	70	100

Recidivists 53%

(ii) Focus group participant profiles

Three focus groups involving a total of 16 participants were facilitated. Focus group members undertook a variety of roles within the prisons, including social workers (38%), directors (19%), penologists (19%), wing chiefs (13%), psychologists (6%) and officers (6%). Most had extensive experience working for the Thailand Department of Corrections and were responsible for the well-being of special category prisoners (i.e., women with mental health problems, mothers, foreign nationals, elderly and physically disabled prisoners) as well as re-integration planning/support, rehabilitation and/or vocational training.

Pathways into prison

The first step towards understanding and in turn constructively responding to women's reintegration, is gleaning knowledge of how women come to be imprisoned in the first place. The characteristics of women's life histories not only set them on a pathway to prison; these characteristics also impact their incarceration and post-release experiences. The following themes were identified as being central to women's pathways to prison in Thailand for drug offending:

(i) Victimisation

Prior research shows a strong relationship between victimisation, associated trauma, substance abuse, offending/criminalisation and imprisonment. Arguably, the line between victim and offender is more often blurred for women than men. Here, victimisation (including physical and emotional abuse) in childhood was a common theme in the imprisoned women's stories, as was being the victim of domestic violence over the life course.

Figure 3: Victimisation experiences
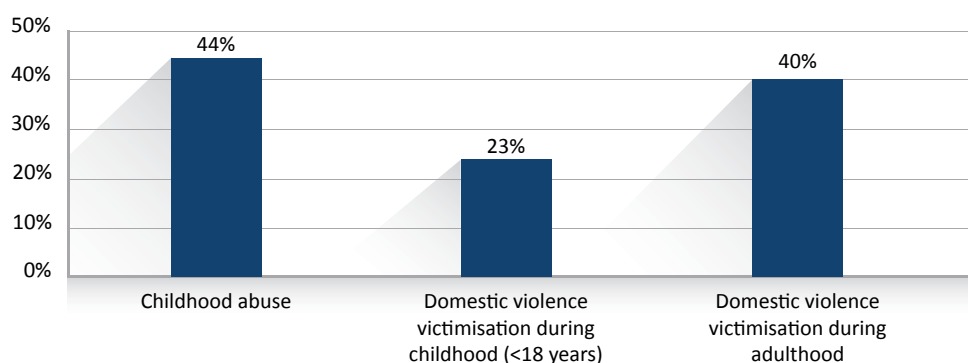
As children, 44% of the women in this research had experienced child abuse defined as either violence being perpetrated directly against them by caregivers, and/or having lived with violence being perpetrated by male family members against their mothers. Comparable to those who had experienced direct forms of abuse, women who had lived with domestic violence as children expressed feelings of being fearful, unsafe, unloved, powerless, and different from other children. Abuse experienced in the family home frequently caused young women to "run away," become "attached" to deviant friendship groups, and use and/or sell drugs. Childhood abuse, therefore, played a fundamental role in women's offending pathways.

During adolescence, 23% of the women reported having been the victim of domestic violence, and as adults, 40% revealed that they had been victimised in this way. The violence reported included controlling behaviours, emotional abuse, sexual assault and often brutal physical violence. Domestic violence is linked to women's drug offending/criminalisation in both direct and indirect ways. Directly, women may be compelled into criminality by their victimisers through love and/or fear. Indirectly, domestic violence can have a negative economic impact, limiting the financial means of victimised women and leading them to crime out of economic necessity. The trauma of intimate partner abuse can also lead to substance misuse as a coping mechanism.

(ii) Other adverse life experiences

Other adverse life experiences are stressful or traumatic events that include but are not limited to child abuse and domestic violence victimisation.

Figure 4: Other adverse life experiences
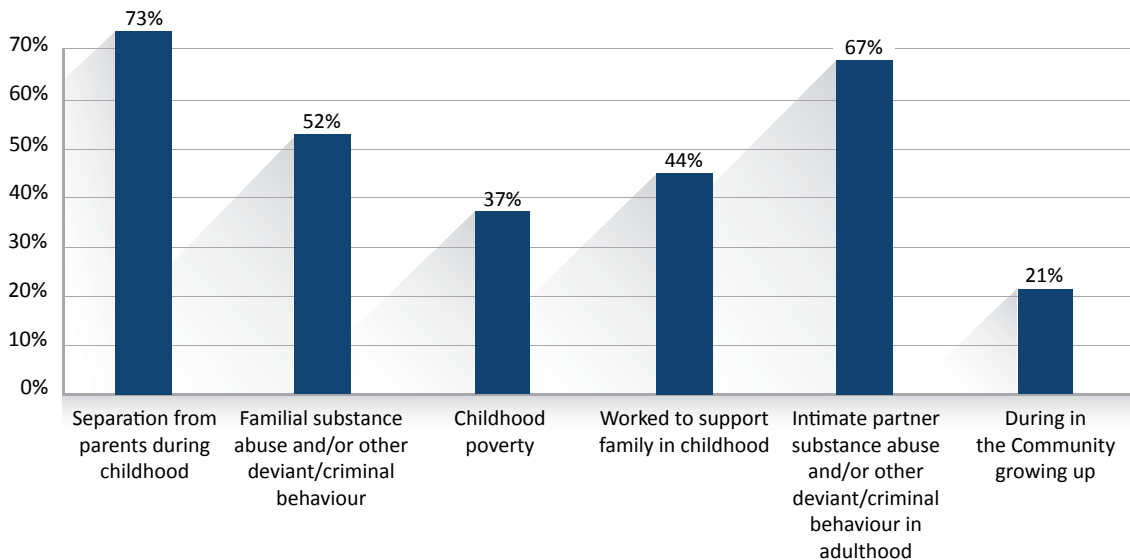
As you can see from the figure above, during childhood, many of the women described living in disordered communities (i.e. communities characterised by drug use and dealing), households marred by severance of the parent/child relationship (through parental abandonment, imprisonment or death), familial substance abuse and/or other deviant/criminal behaviour, poverty, associated low levels of education, and child labour. Teen pregnancy and motherhood were also common alongside marrying young, and/or being in intimate relationships with partners who were unfaithful, used drugs, and/or were engaged in other deviant/criminal behaviours (usually drug dealing). During adulthood, and in addition to living with domestic violence, dysfunctional intimate relationships were commonplace. Most frequently, the women reported being romantically involved with men who either used and/or sold drugs.

(iii) Economic marginalisation and familial caretaking responsibilities

Most of the imprisoned women had limited education, which resulted in poor employment prospects and in turn, socio-economic marginalisation. Poverty plays a key role in many women's pathways to crime and often intersects with familial caregiving responsibilities. Nearly all the women (83%) in this study were mothers and/or had other family members (most frequently parents and grandparents) who were economically reliant on them (36%). Thus, drug selling often occurred within the milieu of familial economic provisioning. Other women reported using drugs because it "gave them energy" enabling them to work longer hours.

(iv) Deviant friendships and childhood deviant behaviour

Over half the women reported deviant peer group associations during childhood and more than 60% had engaged in deviant/criminal behaviour themselves, including drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes, skipping school, partying, using and selling drugs. Childhood friendships presented as central to women's initiation into deviant/criminal behaviour, including drug offending (use and selling). For some, childhood abuse/victimisation and other significant adversity invariably propelled them into deviant friendship groups and problematic behaviour during adolescence. Other women were pulled away from loving families during childhood into deviance/offending by anti-social peers and the excitement associated with partying, drinking alcohol and eventually, using drugs. Finally, for some women were introduced to methamphetamine by female peer groups during their teenage years as a panacea for weight loss.

By adulthood, every woman we interviewed had drug offending associates and over 62% identified these relationships as contributing to their imprisonment trajectory.

(v) Emotional distress, substance misuse and help-seeking

Victimisation, other adversities (in childhood and/or adulthood), emotional distress, mental illness, substance abuse and offending are often interconnected. Adverse life experiences (including victimisation) negatively impact emotional well-being and may lead to mental health problems. Drugs and/or alcohol can be utilised as a form of self-medication to numb the emotional pain. As demonstrated above, adversity was a common feature in the lives of the women interviewed and the negative life experience/substance misuse nexus was frequently narrated.

Thus, many of the women in this research sold drugs (a serious offence under Thai law) to support their addiction. At some point in their lives, close to 85% of the women recounted problematic substance misuse in that they defined themselves as being "addicted" or narrated having used drugs and/or alcohol regularly, i.e., "usually" or "almost" "every day". Every woman who narrated drug dependence had used methamphetamine (yaba and/or ice), but some (16%) also described the problematic use of alcohol.

One cause of concern, given the connection between addiction and criminality, and the significant number of women in this research who reported problematic substance misuse, was that few had sought or received help prior to imprisonment. Only four women had ever participated in a drug rehabilitation programme

pre-imprisonment, and none had attended at their own initiative. Rather, all were sentenced to serve time in government-run rehabilitation facilities. When asked about the utility of these compulsory drug rehabilitation programmes, two women explained that it had made no difference. They both went back to using drugs upon release.

Prison life

Economic marginalisation, familial caretaking, victimisation, trauma, drug addiction, disordered communities, and familial, intimate, and peer group relationships are presented as crucial variables in women's prison trajectories. Thus, to aid re-entry, during incarceration gender-responsive/trauma-informed care/ practice and programming should be utilised to empower and support women's healing. This should include the provision of a healthy rather than harming prison environment/experience alongside programme and support mechanisms to improve women's wellbeing and rehabilitation prospects. Re-entry programming and connections to post-release support services (i.e., through-care) are vital.

(i) Prison environments and overall experiences

During interviews and focus groups, women and prison staff highlighted the ways in which the general prison environment impacted inmates in both positive and negative ways. In terms of overall positives, women's narrations culminated under the following common themes:

1. Prison as an ameliorator – Some women described how imprisonment ameliorated their problems by forcing sobriety and removing them from the hardships that faced them outside prison walls. For two women, imprisonment helped to separate them from dysfunctional and abusive intimate relationships. Prison had provided a respite from the loneliness and monotony of life on the outside, as well as a reprieve from poverty.

2. Prison as a medium to reprioritise relationships – Women explained how imprisonment helped them to reassess the value of family, leading to reprioritisation of these relationships over problematic peers and intimate partners.

3. Prison as an instrument for self-reflection, growth and empowerment – Women expressed that prison had given them the space to self-reflect on their lives and on themselves, feel stronger/ empowered, and develop patience, self-discipline and frugality. Other women explained how prison had made them stronger and quelled their impatience and temper.

4. Prison as a source of support and encouragement – For some women, the most positive feature of prison life was that it provided them with a source of encouragement. Encouragement emanated from positive relationships with prison staff and fellow inmates. The women recurrently narrated the constructive nature of their friendships with other prisoners. Additionally, the women expressed that prison staff were "friendly", "nice", "kind", "supportive," easy to "talk to", and "helpful." The narrations indicated a level of sensitivity by prison personnel toward women's needs, and thus, staff aptitude in gender responsive/trauma informed care/practice.

5. Prison as a supplier of learning and knowledge – Finally, gaining knowledge was highlighted more generally by the women as being a positive prison experience.

Negatives included issues associated with overcrowding and access to necessities, an inability to source additional provisions, and the anxiety of being separated from family and other loved ones.

1. Overcrowding and access to basic necessities - The most common hardship expressed during interviews were problems associated with prison overcrowding. Overcrowding was "stressful", made women feel "rushed", "uncomfortable", and like they were constantly "competing." In addition, yet connected to overcrowding, women expressed concerns over an inability to access necessities, including water, quality food and mattresses for sleeping.

2. Inability to access additional provisions - While access to necessity items may have been stressful and sometimes less than optimal, women never went without food, water or bedding. Still, prison life could be markedly improved for those who engaged in paid work and/or had family able to deposit money into prison accounts and/or provide provisions. With money, prisoners can purchase additional items from the prison shop (i.e., food, drinks and toiletry supplies). However, the capacity to access supplementary provisions depended on several factors. First, formal work was not always available to everyone. Second, familial economic hardship, which was frequently exacerbated by the incarceration of the main economic provider, meant families were not always able to provide support. Thus, for some women, the economic marginalisation experienced outside continued inside.

3. Separation from family and other loved ones - For many women, separation from family was the most difficult feature of imprisonment. In addition to the emotional distress caused by estrangement, the women agonised over the well-being of family members. Thus, the question of how families were coping financially and with the care of children was a source of immense angst. Other women worried about the health of their loved ones.

(ii) Staying connected to loved ones

As noted above, separation from family through incarceration can be distressing. Further, we know that social connection especially to families can aid women's re-entry success. Thus, prison systems that support the preservation of familial bonds are crucial to the well-being of women both during and post-incarceration. The prisons where these groups of women were housed made every attempt, within the confines of prison overcrowding and resourcing, to support connectedness with family, friends and intimate partners through the provision of visitation (both open and closed), letters and video calling through LINE app. Overall, general/closed visitation was the most common way that women stayed connected, followed by letter writing. However, a not insignificant number of women had also attended open visits. Line video calling was only mentioned in one prison. Overall, women commented that staying connected to loved ones provided them with hope, happiness and encouragement.

The women explained that general or closed visitations were available at their facilities on specific days each week and tended to run between five to 20 minutes per session. On busy days, usually weekends, women reported that visitation times were restricted due to higher visitor volume. This is likely also related to concomitant prison overcrowding. Screens divided women from guests, and communication occurred through a telephone. When asked how they felt about general visitation, most women conveyed satisfaction with the environment, while some felt it was too "noisy". Some women were satisfied with the allotted times, while others felt it was insufficient.

Open visits materialised from a couple of times per year to every few months and tended to be longer than general visits with women reporting session times of 25 minutes to half a day long. The most positive feature of open visitation was the removal of the screen and the ability of women to physically connect with loved ones. No one objected to the environment or the designated times but saying goodbye to family was often difficult. However, open visitation was not accessible to everyone. Several women expounded that those classified as "lower class", serving short terms and/or sentenced for more than one offence were disqualified from open visitation.

Letters could also be sent and received. However, the women explained that prison staff read all outgoing and incoming mail to check for inappropriate content. The women did not seem perturbed by this arrangement and explained that prison staff would quickly read their letters and send them out. While there was no limit in receiving letters, restrictions were reportedly placed on the number of letters inmates could write and correspondence length. Prison overcrowding likely necessitates such restrictions. Further, as was the case with open visitation, the right to write letters reportedly varied according to prisoner classification. For some, letter writing was not an option because they could not remember the address and/or their family members had literacy challenges.

LINE video calling was operational in every prison but appeared underutilised. This communication tool gave women an additional way to stay connected. Prison visitation can be difficult for family and other loved ones who reside in areas located long distances from the prison. Once again, however, eligibility depended on prisoner classification.

(iii) Disconnection from loved ones

Despite provisions for visitation, letter writing and video calling, at some point, 67% of women still recounted disconnection from loved ones. Children, parents, intimate partners and/or other family members of central importance to the women either rarely made contact, were communicative at some point but then broke off contact, or became completely estranged. Some explained that visitation was simply not feasible for their loved ones because of distance and/or financial constraints and/or age. For others, children did not visit because their caregivers or the women themselves did not want them to.

1. Women not informing loved ones of their imprisonment – Some women explained that they had lost contact with family, spouses and friends because they never told anyone about their incarceration. The reasons for this appeared threefold. First, relationships were already fractured. Second, women did not want to cause their families undue stress or worry. Third, feelings of guilt and shame impeded women from contacting family.
2. Infeasibility of visitation – Some women were housed in prisons located a long way from their families. This made visitation difficult, if not impossible. Travelling long distances costs money. Several women explained that their families could not afford to come and visit.
3. Concerns about children in prison – Concerns about children in prison either came from those caring for the women's children outside the prison walls, the women themselves or their children.
4. "People just disappear" – Finally, for some women, loved ones simply disappeared. Familial and spousal abandonment left women feeling confused, rejected and alone.

(iv) Rehabilitative programmes and support

Prison authorities should be preparing women for re-entry from the beginning of their sentence and ideally, support and programming should be targeted to address the factors that led women on a pathway to prison. Exploration of prison trajectories suggests programming/support aimed at addressing substance misuse, abuse, mental health and trauma recovery, and economic marginalisation via meaningful educational, vocational and work opportunities can be a useful way of addressing the needs of the women. Re-entry planning, programming and connections to post-release support services with post-release through-care are also vital.

Every woman participated in a pre-release programme and most engaged in vocational/educational training and/or work. Involvement in substance abuse programmes varied by prison. Support and programmes for victimisation, mental health and trauma recovery were generally limited and tended to occur in the context of drug rehabilitation. It is important to note that religious programmes, sport, exercise, vocational/educational training and work also play a role in respect of women's emotional well-being.

1. Planning for re-entry, programming and through-care

During focus group discussions, prison staff explained that re-entry preparation began at intake with individualised sentencing plans. These included directives regarding treatment, programming and support. However, prison overcrowding and resulting low staff-to-prisoner ratios posed challenges in terms of supporting women in complying with these plans. Every prison provided women with a re-entry programme. These programmes took place from between one year and a few months pre-release, were compulsory and ran from three days to several months, depending on the prison. Re-entry programmes aimed to prepare prisoners physically, mentally, and intellectually for community reintegration while also advising them about through-care post-release. The content of the re-entry programme varied by prison, but we were told it generally included the following aspects:

- Mental health support/empowerment
- Life skills development/training
- Vocational training
- Understanding the law, including the legislation governing illicit drugs
- Religion and ethics
- Family re-unification
- Connecting women with post-release support services

Further, re-entry planning was technically available to all prisoners via a one-on-one meeting with prison staff. CARE (Centre for Assistance to Reintegration and Employment) was available in all prisons to aid women with pre-release planning, where prison staff interviewed prisoners to determine their needs and plan for re-entry. Links with re-entry accommodation, work and support services could be established through this and prison staff could also contact women post-release to see how they are doing. Once back in the community, women could also contact CARE for advice/support. Overall, at all three facilities, women expressed positivity about the available re-entry programmes. They explained that these initiatives taught them to plan for their release.

However, despite the provision of programmes, individualised pre-release planning and post-release support, women still voiced concern about a lack of preparedness and post-release community-based assistance. In theory, women were able to meet individually with prison staff for re-entry planning, yet many appeared unaware that this service/support provision existed. The above disconnect between the availability, awareness and provision of pre-release planning and through-care may be another problem associated with prison overcrowding. High prisoner-to-staff ratios make the relaying of information logistically challenging. Further, under such conditions, the provision of individualised pre-sentence planning and post-release support becomes virtually impossible.

2. Vocational/educational training, support and/or work

Taking into account the connection between women's socio-economic disadvantage and offending, within the prison walls, it is imperative that women are provided with education, training and work opportunities to increase their prospects of accessing meaningful and adequately paying employment post-release. Every prison provided educational/vocational training and work opportunities, including:

Educational programmes:
- **Basic literacy**
- **High school certificates**
- **Vocational certificates**

Vocational training, including formal prison work:

- Beautician
- Massage therapy
- Barista
- Arts and crafts
- Cooking
- Information technology
- Business management

- Tiling
- Call centre
- Jewellery making
- Rubber making
- Packaging production
- Paper bag folding
- Manufacturing automobile spare parts

It should be noted that vocational training is difficult to delineate from formal prison work because the latter nearly always results in women learning new employability skills. However, unlike vocational training, formal work had the added advantage of dividend payment. However, most women in formal work told us that they were paid too little to save any money for re-entry. Despite this, having money to spend in prison did make life more comfortable. Still, some were able to save, and they reported that having this financial buffer would aid them post-release. Some women participated in informal work, namely, undertaking menial tasks (e.g., laundry) for other prisoners who then provided remuneration, sometimes monetary but usually in the form of goods, such as food and toiletries. Women worked informally because formal work opportunities were unavailable to them and/or families were incapable of providing financial assistance due to estrangement and/or impoverishment.

In general, women expressed positivity about the educational/vocational training provided and participation in formal paid work. Engagement in these activities lessened the pains of imprisonment. By giving the women something to do, vocational/educational training and/or work made the days go faster, alleviated boredom, overthinking and stress while also allowing a space to learn new skills. Involvement in vocational/educational training (as was the case with other programmes) also led to prisoner reclassification and subsequent sentence reductions. However, prison staff and some women were more dubious about the transferability of prison-based vocational skills to the outside world. A supplementary concern expressed by the women was that accessibility to vocational training and formal work, like open visitation and letter writing, was contingent on prisoner classification and sentence length. Further, formal work and vocational training places were limited, a problem undoubtedly exacerbated by prison overcrowding. Within the compass of employability, what women wanted most was a programme or support mechanism that connected them with jobs post-release.

3. Substance misuse programmes

Most of the women in this research recounted the problematic use of drugs and/or alcohol at some point in their lives, but few had ever sought or received treatment. During their current term of incarceration, only half the women had participated in a drug rehabilitation programme, but this varied by institution.

Two prisons had a therapeutic community (TC) programme. This programme was targeted at women with a drug use history, provided intensive rehabilitation and ran for four months. Everyone who participated in TC expressed positivity. The programme was described as informative, engaging, supportive, healing, inspiring and useful for post-release planning. TC encouraged women to strive for a drug-free life that motivates them to stop using drugs. Shorter term drug rehabilitation programmes were also available. In one prison, there was a "drug rehabilitation programme for drug addicts" that ran for 60 hours over twelve days. In another prison, women described being involved in a "BMC [Behaviour Modification Curriculum] programme, a rehabilitation programme for those who are drug-user and small-scale dealer. BMC ran for 60 hours over 12 days.

The problem of returning to a drug-using environment was raised alongside the determination needed to face this challenge. Imagining the possibility of a drug-free life on the outside may be easier said than done. While nearly all the women recounted motivation to change, to stop using drugs, life on the outside may pose numerous challenges.

4. Abuse, mental health and trauma recovery

Prison programmes aimed at addressing histories of abuse, mental health and trauma are essential to meeting women's needs and aiding re-entry. Prisons recognised the correlation between these factors. Women's descriptions of the TC and BMC programmes were indicative of this, while pre-release programmes also provided support for emotional well-being. More targeted approaches were also evident via the establishment of Happy Centres in every prison. These centres provided women with a physical space to heal from trauma. In addition to the Happy Centres, every prison provided one-on-one counselling/psychological support to prisoners, and one woman mentioned that she had received psychological support through an art therapy programme. When asked what the prisons could do better to aid re-entry, a few women suggested the need for more directed mental health support. Also of note, the direct addressing of women's victimisation experiences was negligible from the women's perspectives. Only one woman reported receiving information about domestic violence even though this, along with childhood abuse, played a central role in both her and other women's imprisonment pathways.

5. Religion, exercise and sport

Like vocational training, work and other prison programmes, religion and exercise/sport can lessen the pains of imprisonment. These programmes give women something to do, help to alleviate stress and improve psychological well-being. Religious programmes were viewed by many women as transformative, providing an opportunity to learn, focus thoughts, become calmer people, and as such, helpful not only during imprisonment but also post-release.

Expectations and experiences of re-entry

Pathways into prison and experience of imprisonment are inherent in re-entry. The women who participated in this research had multifaceted and intersecting needs. The particularities of women's requisites and background set them on a pathway to prison, impacting incarcerated experiences and rehabilitative needs prefacing re-entry.

(i) Re-entry needs and challenges

A general overview of women's re-entry needs and challenges appears in figure 5 below. Overall, family, money/employment and accommodation were underscored as being the foremost factors in women's re-entry. Community acceptance, friendships, intimate partners and individual level traits (e.g., personal fortitude and motivation to change) were also deemed pivotal. Some women mentioned that through-care/post-release support and religion were important.

Figure 5: Women's re-entry needs and challenges
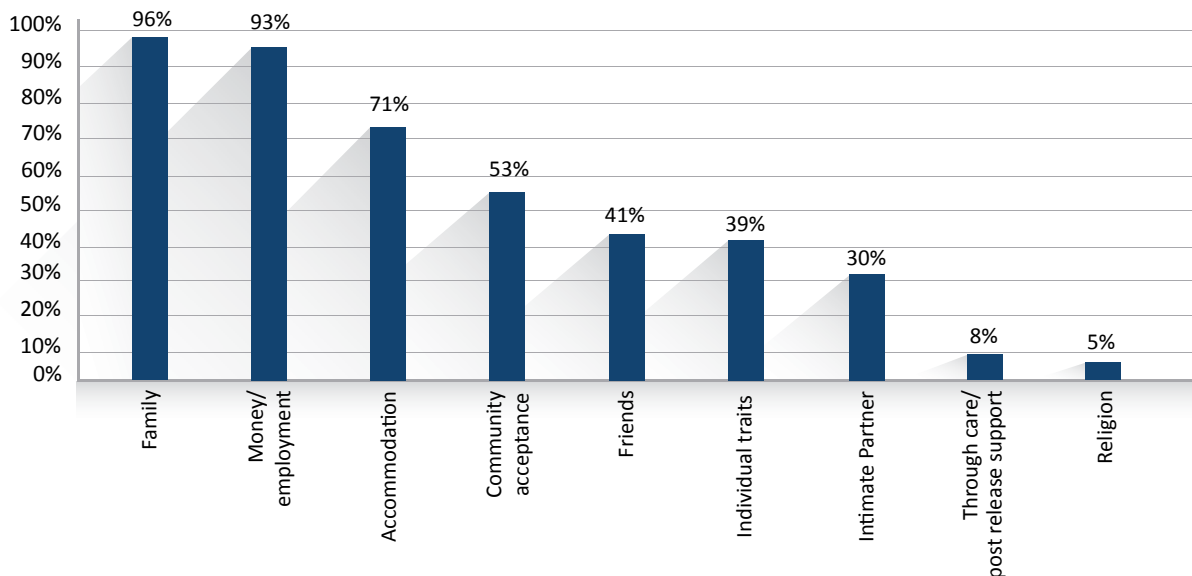
It is important to understand that women's re-entry needs and challenges were invariably interchangeable. For example, connection to nurturing, encouraging, normative families were perceptually positive while re-establishing bonds with drug using/selling family members presented as a challenge. Similarly, establishing income security may increase the chances of re-entry success while an inability to establish financial well-being denoted an impediment.

1. Money/Employment

Economic marginalisation and the need to financially support families frequently underpinned women's offending. Within the prison system, efforts were being made to equip women with skills and/or support to increase their chances of post-release economic survival, although the transferability of these skills was being questioned. Further, women often faced the prospect of leaving prison with no savings. It will be recalled that the dividend paid for prison work (for those eligible for formal work) was not substantial. Concurrently, the ex-inmate label posed challenges to post-release economic security. For prison staff, the women's ability to secure a livelihood was pivotal to re-entry. Re-imprisoned women narrated post-release financial insecurity as a central theme in their re-offending. In the interviews with women post-release, economic insecurity was also narrated as a key challenge.

2. Family

The maintenance of family ties during incarceration is important, as evidenced by the fact that nearly every woman prior to release highlighted the centrality of family to re-entry. During pre-release interviews, families were narrated by the women as offering love, encouragement, understanding, emotional security, strength, a sense of purpose, belonging and responsibility. Some women expressed that their responsibilities to their families would give them purpose post-release. Corresponding with purposefulness and responsibility, families also afforded an incentive for change. Prior to their release, women frequently identified families, particularly mothers, grandparents and children, as giving them the motivation to stop drug use and offending. In addition to emotional support, families were narrated as being crucial for practical assistance, supporting women's re-integration via the provision of money, housing and employment opportunities.

During interviews with the women post-release, similar sentiments pertaining to the centrality of the family to women's emotional well-being were conveyed. Conversely, the chances of re-entry success were thought to decrease for women who experienced familial estrangement and dysfunction. For some women, post-release family reunification meant having to grapple with the same issues that led them on a pathway to prison in the first place. This included issues associated with the intersection between economic marginalisation and familial caregiving responsibilities as well as returning to families ravaged by drug abuse/offending.

3. Accommodation

For the women in this research, securing "a place to live" post-release was a fundamental re-entry need. For most, the re-entry plan was to live with family. Rarely, this encompassed intimate partners and male family members. More often, women narrated that their post-release homes would be with female kin, namely mothers, grandmothers, great grandmothers, sisters, aunts, cousins or adult daughters. However, going home could mean resuming life in contexts characterised by familial drug use/offending, increasing the risk of re-offending and re-incarceration. The importance of pre-release accommodation was also explicated by re-imprisoned women whilst reflecting on their repeat offending.

4. Intimate partners

Women's victimisation and associated trauma via intimate relationships contributed to their imprisonment pathways. Thus, unsurprisingly, abusive and criminal partners were also found to create difficulties for women leaving prison. Abusive men can make re-entry hazardous. Even if intimate partners are not overtly abusive, romantic relationships with drug using/selling men can set formerly incarcerated women on a pathway back to prison.

Another post-release theme was that of men causing women anguish by having extramarital affairs. It will be recalled that infidelity was also recounted in women's stories of their pathways to prison. Here, the fracturing of intimate bonds by unfaithful husbands/boyfriends was common, and women would start using drugs to deal with the emotional angst this caused. What became clear from the women's stories and focus groups with prison staff, was that in contrast to family, husbands/boyfriends were more likely to be harming than supportive. Post-release intimate relationships with abusive, unfaithful and drug-offending men, meant contending with the same issues that led women on a pathway to prison in the first place.

5. Friendships

Friendships presented as both a blessing and a curse on women's re-integration. Friendships provided emotional and practical support but could also contribute to women's re-offending. Like intimate partners, although perhaps not as starkly, friends presented as being more confuting than supportive of women's re-entry ambitions. Deviant peer group associations contributed to women's original prison pathways. Post-release, reconnecting with drug offending friends set women back on a journey to incarceration.

6. Community acceptance

Prior research has shown that women need to feel accepted back into the normative society once they are released from prison. However, prior to their release, the women in this research narrated concern that they may face stigmatisation. The potential impact of stigma on women's re-entry manifests in several ways. Employers may be circumspect about hiring ex-inmates. Second, securing housing may be difficult. Housing and financial security are both crucial to re-entry success, and negativity of the ex-inmate label can impact both. Additionally, stigma may be psychologically stressful, result in social withdrawal and herald a return to drug use/offending. Some women expressed awareness of the stigma they might confront but felt that familial support could buffer the ill effects.

7. Emotional distress, trauma and substance misuse

Many women's lives were characterised by victimisation, disordered families and intimate relationships, growing up in neighbourhoods ravaged by drug use/offending, deviant peer group associations, low levels of education, and familial economic provisioning against the backdrop of financial insecurity. Drug addiction was also common and frequently arose within the interconnected milieu of victimisation, other life adversities and trauma. However, few women had sought help or received treatment in their communities for their substance misuse. Behind prison walls, numerous attempts were being made to ameliorate the pains of imprisonment. However, women still faced several challenges. Thus, for some women, the imagination and/or reality of

re-entry intensified suffering, presented as traumatic and overwhelming. Though never explicitly articulated, emotional distress, trauma and substance abuse present as additional re-entry challenges.

(ii) Post-release successes

The needs of women prior to release were also a proxy for how women perceived re-entry success. In addition to abstaining from drugs and not re-offending, the following presented as key indicators of success for women before they returned to the community: a) securing financial security, b) re-establishing familial relationships, c) finding a place to call home, d) staying away from environments ravaged by drug offending, e) extricating themselves from problematic intimate relationships and friendship groups, and f) staying strong notwithstanding the challenges they might face. Interviews with re-imprisoned women and those who had already returned to society demonstrated that many of these successes could be realised. When asked what they had achieved post-release, these women spoke of securing legitimate work, exiting dysfunctional intimate relationships, reuniting with family, refraining from selling drugs, ceasing or reducing drug use, and staying strong.

Post-release interviews with women currently back in the community also revealed success in not returning to drug use, reuniting with family, securing employment and staying away from people and environments characterised by drugs. Only one woman had reported the fracturing of familial bonds, and as a result, she had used drugs again, but this was narrated as a 'one-off incident'. All but one woman had found employment, and the woman who was currently unemployed was "looking after her children". Every woman had managed to stay away from what they described as "bad influences".

Conclusion and recommendations

Thailand has witnessed substantial growth since the 1990s in the number of women imprisoned. This escalation has been propelled by punitive drug law, policy and criminal justice practice and has disproportionality impacted women. Compared to men, drug offenders constitute a higher proportion of Thailand's total women's prison population. At present, over 84% of imprisoned women in Thailand are 'doing time' for a drug offence. This compares to 79% of the male prison population. As the number of women in Thailand's prisons grows, so too does the number of women who return to the community. Accordingly, one of the challenges confronting Thai society is the successful re-entry of mounting numbers of formerly incarcerated women. Most women returning to society from prison in Thailand will have been incarcerated for a drug offence. Utilising the voices of women (imprisoned and formerly incarcerated) and of the prison staff tasked with their support inside prison walls, this research sought to understand the needs, challenges and successes of drug offending/criminalised women re-entering Thai society. Based on the information gleaned from this research, some recommendations are highlighted below.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Drug law and sentencing policies should take into account women offenders' circumstances and pathways to offending as well as impact of imprisonment on women and their family. Consideration should be given to developing and implementing gender responsive non-custodial measures which can reduce stigma associated with imprisonment.

Recommendation 2: In the interim and given the centrality of re-entry planning and through-care support to re-integration, increased government funding and staffing should be provided to CARE and other specialised re-integration units in women's prisons. This would increase the capacity for individualised re-entry planning and provision of through-care support.

Recommendation 3: Access to vocational/educational training programmes and formal dividend paying work should not be restricted on the basis of sentence classification, sentence length, age and/or pregnancy.

Recommendation 4: To promote successful rehabilitation and reintegration, open visitation and LINE video calling should not be restricted on the basis of prisoner classification and/or sentence length. Women prisoners should also be allowed to have extra contact with their family as their release date approaches.

Recommendation 5: Efforts should be made to increase the use of LINE video calling as well as telephone for women who are disconnected from their families and other loved ones due to geographical distance and poverty.

Recommendation 6: Consideration should be given to developing partnerships between prisons, other government agencies and private business enterprises. These partnerships could be used to both source post-release employment for women and develop vocational training/work-based initiatives within prison that better meet community employability requirements.

Recommendation 7: Consideration should be given to updating correctional policy and practice pertaining to day release so that more women nearing re-entry can participate in work programme within the community during normal business hours.

Recommendation 8: Work and vocational training programme in prison should be chosen and designed with the priority to provide women prisoners with valuable skills corresponding to the actual market needs and the types of jobs women are likely to be offered, but also with a view to breaking gender stereotypes and economic disparities in the job market.

Recommendation 9: The current small business loan schemes operating in some women's prisons should be maintained and potentially extended to all female facilities in order to promote women's self-employment after release.

Recommendation 10: Given that most women imprisoned in Thailand are serving time for drug offending, substance misuse treatment programmes such as Therapeutic Communities (TC) and Behaviour Modification Curricula (BMC) should be provided as a matter of course in all women's prisons, and every woman with a history of substance misuse should be permitted to participate.

Recommendation 11: All women's prisons should develop programmes aimed at addressing the nexus between victimisation (particularly domestic violence), trauma and mental health. The provision of individualised mental health care (i.e. counselling) should also be expanded.

Recommendation 12: Post-release support system is essential to ensure successful reintegration of women prisoners. Consideration should be given to developing programmes that are linked to community initiatives as they can provide continuity of support post-release through a multi-stakeholder collaboration including government agencies, NGOs and civil society organizations.

Recommendation 13: The Thailand Department of Corrections, Department of Probation, local government authorities should look at funding and establishing a network of half-way houses throughout Thailand for women released from prison who are unable to secure safe housing.

Recommendation 14: A public education campaign should be conducted to educate people about women's pathways to prison, and their experiences of prison, re-entry needs, challenges and successes.