Sexual Revictimization and Retraumatization of Women in Prison

Danielle Dirks

When women in foreign countries are sexually abused or sexually exploited by government employees, it is a human rights violation (e.g., Fitzgerald, 1992), but when the same thing happens in the United States, it is a “prison sex scandal” (e.g., Meyer, 1992) (excerpt from Baro, 1997).

Understanding of the role of victimization and traumatization in women’s lives has recently begun to inform the growing body of knowledge on women’s offending (Arnold, 1995; Faith, 1993). Examining the life histories of incarcerated women reveals an extensive and pervasive array of physical, emotional, and sexual abuses (Browne, Miller, & Maguin, 1999; Girshick, 1999; Lake, 1993; Owen & Bloom, 1995; Singer, Bussey, Song, & Lunghofer, 1995). Many of these women have experienced at least one form of sexual victimization in their lifetimes, many of them before the age of 18 (Bloom, Chesney, & Owen, 1994; Heney, 1990). For women with previous histories of abuse, prison life is apt to simulate the abuse dynamics already established in these women’s lives, thus perpetuating women’s further revictimization and retraumatization while serving time. Women’s experiences of revictimization and retraumatization need to be addressed by prison staff, policy, procedure, and programming. A feminist framework may offer a lens by which to view these experiences and offer insight for change.

Arnold (1995) suggests that the interrelated processes that govern women’s victimization and criminalization begin with abuse—including physical, sexual, economic, and racial. Through a process of “structural dislocation,” institutional forms of oppression such as sexism, racism, and classism aid in the removal of girls and women from primary socializing agents such as families and schools. Facing lives filled with “poverty, illiteracy, substance abuse, mental illness, childhood sexual abuse, and an intricate web of life-threatening physical, psychological, racial, and social problems,” many of these women’s experiences mark their advent into the criminal justice system (Johnson, 2002, p. 103).
Feminist criminology has moved beyond examining the crimes of women, and has begun to examine the broader links that may explain women's offending. For example, a study by Widom (1989) found that abused girls were more likely than girls without histories of abuse to become criminals or delinquents. Girls who had been sexually abused as children also have an increased risk for adult arrest for prostitution (Widom & Ames, 1994). Other studies have also linked early childhood abuse with later criminal activity (American Correctional Association, 1990; Lake, 1993). Much of the research in this area has focused on the links between childhood abuse, depression, substance abuse, and subsequent criminality (McClellan, Farabee, & Crouch, 1997; Singer et al., 1995; Smith & Thornberry, 1995).

**Prevalence and Severity of Women’s Histories of Abuse**

Given the link between victimization and criminalization, the extant research literature suggests that women in prison have extensive histories of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. Incarcerated women are estimated to have rates of abuse six to ten times that of women in the general population (Pollock, 2002). Although victimization and traumatization rates vary among samples and research methods, the lives of women in prison have often been characterized by the “prevalence and severity” of physical and sexual abuse throughout their childhoods and adult lives (Browne, Miller, & Maguin, 1999).

Women in both state and federal prisons are more likely to have histories of abuse than men in prison (McClellan et al., 1997; Snell & Morton, 1994). A 1991 study by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) revealed that nearly half (48%) of women they interviewed had been physically or sexually assaulted prior to their incarceration (Snell & Morton, 1994). Citing that the BJS study (1991) methodology may have suppressed reporting, more recent research has tackled the goal of filling in the gaps of previous literature to elucidate a more comprehensive understanding of the victimization and traumatization experiences of incarcerated women (Browne et al., 1999; Owen & Bloom, 1995).

Owen and Bloom (1995) found that 80% of their sample of women in the California penal system had experienced some form of physical or sexual abuse in their lifetimes. In a study of women in a New York maximum-security facility, Browne, Miller, and Maguin (1999) found that 70% had experienced “severe physical violence” from a caretaker during adolescence and 75% reported experiences
of physical abuse from an intimate partner in adulthood. Nearly 60% of these women reported sexual abuse during childhood or adolescence and 77% reported some form of victimization, including threats of assault involving weapons to physical and sexual attacks by “nonintimates,” over their lifetimes. Lake (1993) found that 85% of the 83 women in her sample had experienced at least one form of violent victimization including physical and sexual abuse and assault by parents, siblings, relatives, partners, or strangers. Similar to the rate reported by Browne, Miller, and Maguin, nearly three-quarters of the women in this sample had also been physically or sexually assaulted or robbed by strangers. When including “emotional abuse,” Girshick (1999) found that 90% of the women in her prison sample had been abused physically, sexually, or emotionally as adults. Over forty percent (43%) of the women in this sample reported being sexually assaulted.

Singer, Bussey, Song, and Lunghofer (1995) found that 81% of their sample had experienced sexual victimization when combining experiences of child and adult sexual abuse. In this sample, roughly half of the women were serving time for prostitution. Over two-thirds (68%) of the sample experienced one act of forced sexual activity; nearly half (48%) reported experiencing sexual violence before the age of 18. Bloom, Chesney, and Owen (1994) found that 31% of their sample of California women in prison reported childhood sexual abuse and 23% had experienced sexual abuse as adults.

Although women of color are disproportionately overrepresented in the penal system (Johnson, 2002), very little research has focused on how varying intersections of race, class, and sexuality create diverse victimization experiences for women in prison prior to their incarceration. A recent literature review by West (2002) revealed that black women are commonly victims of childhood sexual abuse, intimate partner violence, sexual assault, and sexual harassment and are overrepresented in “severe” categories of childhood sexual abuse. Black women’s experiences are often shaped by class distinctions as low-income black women experience elevated rates of sexual assault (Kalichman et al., 1998). Black American women are also significantly less likely to disclose sexual assault and more likely to have repeated assaults than white American women, both of which can have serious effects on recovery from rape trauma (Wyatt, Guthrie, & Notgrass, 1992).

Lesbians may also face elevated rates of physical and verbal abuse in comparison to heterosexual women (Balsam, 2003) and these victimization experiences are sometimes directly related to their sexual
orientation (Balsam, 2003; Pilkington & D’Augelli, 1995). For example, women who identify as lesbian may be at increased risk for verbal and physical abuse in childhood and adolescence, both from their families and their communities as a number of researchers are beginning to find (Pilkington & D’Augelli, 1995; Tjaden, Thoennes, & Allison, 1999). Lesbians may also experience a form of “cultural victimization” characterized by the shame, negative sense of self, and “victim mentality” resulting from living in a heterosexist society (Neisen, 1993, as cited in Balsam, 2003). Undoubtedly, interlocking and intersecting experiences of oppression have impacted the lives of women entering and living in prison as well. Overall, the pervasive existence of victimization has had a significant influence on the lives of all women as both victims and witnesses to this violence (Bloom, Owen, Covington, & Raede., 2003). Prison dynamics may create uniquely harmful experiences for women who already experience cultural victimization in the forms of racism, classism, and heterosexism—among other forms of oppression in their everyday lives.

**Vulnerable Women in Vulnerable Positions**

Victimization is a “lifelong possibility” for women as childhood abuse experiences often follow women into their adult lives (Girshick, 1999). According to Finkelhor and Browne (1985), four processes shape early traumatization experiences: traumatic sexualization, powerlessness, stigmatization, and betrayal. These early childhood boundary violations can often shape women’s later experiences in life in creating a weak sense of self, feelings of guilt or shame, and deprivation, thus shaping women’s further alienation and vulnerability (Girshick, 1999; Heney & Kristiansen, 1998). Many women who have been battered, or women who suffer from Battered Woman’s Syndrome, I often experience low self-esteem, a sense of powerlessness or worthlessness, and self-blame (Walker, 1992, 1994). Research has documented the links between previous victimization and subsequent incidents of revictimization; these links represent a constellation of issues regarding women’s mental health and well-being (Wyatt et al., 1992).

Given the prevalence and severity of the experiences of previous sexual victimization and traumatization among incarcerated women, many women in prison suffer from the effects of childhood and adult sexual abuse. If fact, a study by O’Keefe (1998) found that many women in prison score high on measures of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a disorder characterized by excessive fear, flash-
backs of trauma, and diminished sense of well-being that affects more women than men. As Girshick (1999) writes, these women are already vulnerable and then placed in further vulnerable positions detrimental to their emotional and physical well-being.

**Revictimization and Retraumatization**

As Louise (1998) reports, “Unfortunately, the prison system often contributes to the revictimization of these women by perpetuating feelings of powerlessness and vulnerability” (p. 107). Heney and Kristiansen (1998) posit that women in prison are likely to be reexposed to the four “powerful traumatizing processes” of childhood sexual abuse outlined by Finkelhor and Browne (1985) during their incarceration. A legal review by Kupers (2001) outlines the major issues pertaining to women’s experiences of revictimization and retraumatization. He acknowledges that women’s experiences of sexual harassment and abuse, lack of privacy, and retaliation during incarceration may further increase women’s risk for depression, anxiety, PTSD, and decreased overall well being before release from prison. Prison procedures that control every aspect of an imprisoned woman’s life may indeed trigger experiences of previous abuses (Heney & Kristiansen, 1998; Lord, 1995; Louise, 1998).

**In the Name of Security**

Women’s traumatic sexualization and powerlessness are recreated by “institutionalized assaults by line staff on prisoner’s bodies which are conducted in the name of security” (Faith, 1993, p. 229). These assaults reside in the realm of staff sexual misconduct outlined by Moss (1998) as “sexual behavior directed toward inmates, including sexual abuse, sexual assault, sexual harassment, physical conduct of a sexual nature, sexual obscenity, invasion of privacy and conversations or correspondence of a romantic or intimate nature” and can have devastating effects on women’s well-being during incarceration (189). Incarceration also retriggeres abuses with grossly unequal power dynamics, invasive searches, restraints, reading of mail, and a lack of privacy (Girshick, 1999).

Prison power dynamics are shaped by the structural distinction between those in power—prison staff and prison administration—and those without power, the prison inmates. As a result, this structural distinction serves as a constant reminder to women in prison that they do not have autonomy over their own bodies or well-being.
in prison; this message serves to reinforce women's sense of powerlessness. Because imprisonment necessitates that these women have no choice but to comply, these acts also serve to further women's sense of powerlessness, thus retriggering abuse dynamics found in childhood and adulthood. Kupers (2001) adds that the absence of a "safe place" for women in prison occludes women from retreating to a place of healing, for women in prison, there may be "no safe haven" from ongoing abuse (Girshick, 1999).

The existence of male correctional officers in women's facilities may exacerbate power imbalances as women must rely on men for basic necessities, phone privileges, and visiting privileges (Human Rights Watch, 1996). Correctional officers' absolute power over giving warnings, infractions, and punitive measures may provide opportunities for the development of exploitative relationships that hinge on "favor-giving" and avoiding punishment (Amnesty International, 1999; Human Rights Watch, 1996). It is important to note that these patterns of misconduct have also been found among female officers as well, and that sexually exploitative relationships do not always have to involve abuse or violence—power often works just as well (Estrich, 1987). The exploited positions of women in prison places them in the role of "bad girls," thus denying them legitimate victim status because they are viewed as sexually accessible and likely to consent to further exploitation and abuse (Baro, 1997; MacKinnon, 1993).

The Reality of Threat

As Zupan (1992) suggests, women in prison are constantly aware of the threat and possibility for sexual assault in prison. The research literature focusing on women's imprisonment experiences indicates that the risk of sexual assault resembles more of a reality for many women in prison. A report by the Human Rights Watch (1996) organization revealed that many women in prison suffered from well-established patterns of sexual degradation, abuse, and assault at the hands of prison staff and inmates. An investigative report by Amnesty International (1999) also cited that many of the incarcerated women they interviewed in the United States reported on a range of abuses by prison staff including the use of sexually or racially offensive language, inappropriate touching of women's breasts or genitals during searches, inappropriate surveillance while women were unclothed, and rape.

An anonymous mail survey of men and women incarcerated in the Midwest indicated that 7.7% of the women reported being pres-
sured or forced to have sexual contact against their will while incarcerated (Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, Rucker, Bumby, & Donaldson, 1996). The majority of incidents reported in a follow-up study by the same authors (Alarid, 2000) were perpetrated by other women inmates, contrary to the findings of the Human Rights Watch (1996), Amnesty International (1999), and Baro (1997), who indicate that male staff often use “terror, retaliation, and repeated victimization to coerce and intimidate confined women” (Dumond, 2000, p. 409). In fact, women are more likely than men to be sexually abused by correctional officers (Zupan, 1992). When women are housed at men’s facilities, they risk being sexually assaulted by both male officers and male inmates (Amnesty International, 1999; Human Rights Watch, 1996; Stein, 1996). Eigenberg (1994) cautions that the rates of reported sexual assaults in prison may be low estimates, as inmates may feel stigmatized as a result of their experiences and also may fear revealing abuse to researchers or prison authorities for a number of reasons, some including fear of retaliation or fear of further abuse. Research examining women’s experiences and rates of sexual abuse and assault in prison are needed, as the majority of the relevant literature focuses on male inmates (Dumond, 1992; Struckman-Johnson et al., 1996).

A Feminist Perspective for Change

As incarceration rates of women continue to surpass those of men, examining the extensive abuse histories of women is an increasingly important topic of research for prison programming and policy. As Lord (1995) suggests, “our questions need to be about women, not about crime or prisons, but about who the women are and how they become who they are” (p. 259). A feminist framework encompasses the context with which women are both victimized and criminalized. Baro (1997) suggests that women’s experiences in the criminal justice system have been thematically linked by abandonment. She argues that prison administrations, the legal system, and scholars have abandoned the plight of women’s continuing sexual abuse and exploitation within the prison system.

The extant literature does appear to support this notion; there is a notable dearth of prison policy and programming directed toward aiding in women’s recovery from traumatization and victimization (Chesney-Lind, 1998; Coll, Miller, Fields, & Mathews, 1998; Covington, 1998; Gray, Mays & Stohr, 1995; McQuaid & Ehrenreich, 1998; Morris & Wilkinson, 1995; Pomeroy & Kiam, 1998). Change needs to
be directed toward creating prison policy and programming that attend to the omnipresent experiences of abuse and intersecting oppressions in the lives of these women. A feminist framework for change and healing has suggested that "empowerment" should be a goal of counseling and programming within the prison. As suggested by Remer (2003), empowerment strategies should encourage people to identify and challenge the conditions of their lives that may serve to devalue and subordinate them—those conditions that effectively deny them equality of opportunity and access to valued life resources.

Feminist therapists examine the broader context of women's experiences and aid people to connect their own experiences and actions to foster, "resistance and personal integrity rather than infantilization, self-directedness rather than conformity, and self-esteem rather than self-doubt" (Marcus-Mendoza, Klein-Saffran, & Lutze, 1998, p. 181). These goals present unique paradoxes in the context of a prison (Hannah-Moffat, 1995, 2000; Heney & Kristiansen, 1998), and many authors have enumerated the dilemmas with feminist ideals "behind bars" and these critiques should be taken into consideration when developing prison programming and policy (Hannah-Moffat, 1995, 2000; Heney & Kristiansen, 1998; Kendall, 1993, 1994). However, the ideals of feminist therapy and a feminist approach to empowerment (as compared to a criminal-justice approach to empowerment) have been endorsed as the most appropriate approach for women's healing from traumatization and victimization while in prison (Kendall, 1993; Scarth & McLean, 1994).

One promising study (Kendall, 1993) indicated that 92% of women interviewed at the Canadian Prison for Women reported that they were ready to deal with the issues they were working on in counseling. The women in this study were also overwhelmingly supportive of the feminist therapy techniques employed by the counselors. Indeed, programming aimed at repairing and recovering from trauma has been cited by women in prison as one of their most important programming needs (Gray et al., 1995). Counseling in prison should be informed by the most up-to-date literature on trauma and recovery and should be accessible to all women who would like to participate. Feminist therapy, as well as other forms of therapy, should not, however, be pushed upon women who may not be ready to deal with painful issues in their lives. Forms of therapy and counseling should not serve to further revictimize or victim-blame.

Other researchers have additionally warned against counselors and prison staff fulfilling confusing and conflicting roles of both "therapist and disciplinarian" (Marcus-Mendoza et al., 1998).
Although training correctional officers to treat women in prison with esteem, empathy, and compassion could result positively, Hannah-Moffat (1995) writes that, "it is difficult to envision the development of meaningful, respectful, and supportive relationships when guards continue to perform strip searches, open women's mail, monitor their relations with others within and outside of the institution, and at times punish the prisoners" (p. 144). By exploring and creating separate roles for therapists and correctional officers, women can learn that "intimidation and intimacy do not have to coexist in all relationships" (Marcus-Mendoza et al., 1998, p. 182).

A feminist framework suggests that all those who work in the prison should value women's diverse experiences and that women should not be treated in a manner that retraumatizes them. Women who have had previous experiences of victimization in their lifetimes are more likely to have repeated experiences of trauma in their lives. Placing vulnerable women in prison among insensitive or predatory officers may have serious implications for the healing process, as one prisoner counselor shared that correctional officers often target women "like a radar" who have histories of sexual abuse (Human Rights Watch, 1996). It may then not be surprising to learn that the legal system has turned a blind eye to both consensual and nonconsensual sexual contact between inmates and prison staff.

Arguing that cases of sexual misconduct that involve "romance" or some level of consensual contact are too difficult to prosecute, those in the legal arena choose to do nothing to aid women who have been exploited or abused by male prison staff (Baro, 1997; Human Rights Watch, 1996). These legal standards also attempt to jeopardize women's victim status by stigmatizing them as "inmates" or "bad girls," thus occluding any opportunity for their experiences to fall under the purview of "real rape" (Éstrich, 1987; MacKinnon, 1993). Valuing the lives of all women without dichotomizing "good girls" and "bad girls" (even along racial, class, and sexuality lines) should be one goal of creating change within the prison and legal milieu.

The daunting reporting procedures and threat of retaliation serve to further revictimize women. Those who choose to report abuses should be afforded greater protection in reporting abuses. Women's disclosure should be made confidentially, and retaliation should be taken seriously (Amnesty International, 1999; Human Rights Watch, 1996; Smith, 2001). More-explicit policies and laws that directly prohibit any sexual contact between inmates and staff may also aid in investigations and prosecutions by clearly stating that consensual contact is not possible in the context of a prison (Moss,
Prison administration should also implement extensive training for employees and inmates on new procedures that ensure the dignity of women’s bodies and rights; invasive and unnecessary searches should be prohibited to reduce the likelihood of revictimization and retraumatization (Bloom et al., 2003).

As Baro (1997) has suggested, until recently little scholarly research has been dedicated to exploring the lives of sexually abused and exploited women within the criminal justice and penal system. The links between childhood and adult sexual abuse, substance abuse, mental health issues, and criminality has paved the way for a number of empirical questions. Research might usefully examine the efficacy of various prison dynamics and programming. In the slippery politics of “empowerment” and “women-centered” and feminist prisons, how women have fared as a result of various empowerment strategies needs also to be explored. Qualitatively examining the life histories of women is one research methodology that may provide a richer, more-detailed illustration of the intricate links between victimization and criminalization in women’s lives. A thorough examination of women’s intersecting identities and experiences of oppression also desperately needs to be explored as certain groups of women—namely, women of color, poor women, and women with children—are disproportionately incarcerated and victimized. Finally, outcomes for women as a result of policy or programming changes also need to be explored in relation to recidivism rates.

Conclusion: From Victims to Survivors

One critique of a feminist perspective on women’s imprisonment is that it still exists within the realm of incarceration and punitive ideology. Hannah-Moffat (1995) calls on feminists to “challenge this institutional base and consider alternative systems and meanings of sanctioning” (p. 147). Instead of questioning how we can change the prison system, she suggests, “we could instead proceed with a question about how current structures and relations of power facilitate the incarceration of an increasingly high number of nonviolent women” (p. 149). If we understand that women’s criminality is inextricably linked to their victimization and traumatization, we also need to then examine the structural changes that must occur to disrupt the current cycles of victimization in the lives of girls and women. Some individuals may question how as a society we could afford such a structural disruption, but the question still remains, how can we afford not to make these critical changes?
NOTES
1. Battered Woman’s Syndrome is generally recognized as a subcategory of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder that is characterized by the social, emotional, physical, and psychological symptoms of depression, low self-esteem, and isolation that may often follow the personal experience of a series of violent or harmful acts by an intimate partner. For victims of interpersonal violence such as this, symptoms can resemble those exhibited by persons who have experienced traumatic events, such as sexual assault survivors or prisoners of war.

REFERENCES:


Kendall, K. (1994). Creating Real Choices: A Program Evaluation of Thera-
Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Incarcerated Women.” Health & Social Work, 23, 71-75.

Danielle Dirks (ddirks@soc.ufl.edu) is a graduate student researcher at the University of Florida in the Department of Sociology. Her research interests include racial and ethnic relations, gender, and beauty.