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**HOW NEW ZEALAND WOMEN EXPERIENCE THEIR
PARTNERS' IMPRISONMENT**

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A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

of

Master of Arts

in

Psychology

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
PALMERSTON NORTH, NEW ZEALAND

February 2008

“What is particularly interesting here is that, almost universally, it is women who must cope with men’s problems. Throughout their lives, these women have been faced with difficulties arising from male criminality. These problems do not end when husbands are incarcerated. They do not simply vanish when the men disappear behind prison walls. Husbands continue to have a significant impact on their wives’ daily lives”

(Fishman, 1990, p. 262)

“Through their experiences of the “pains of imprisonment” at the border of the correctional setting, women assume the peculiar status of quasi-inmates, people at once legally free and palpably bound.”

(Comfort, 2003, p. 103)

“they were grieving but had no body and couldn’t really grieve in public because going to jail is not acceptable. You are supposed to hide this fact, but if they had died then they could grieve publicly and get the support needed. But when someone goes to jail and you lose them from your daily life, almost like a death, you cannot grieve out loud, you have to grieve silently or else risk shame.”

(Arditti, 2003, p. 128)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank the many people who have given me support and encouragement throughout my journey of completing this thesis.

Firstly, I am eternally grateful to the six women who were brave enough to speak to me of their experiences, and put their trust in my ability to tell their stories. Without your participation this study would not have been possible. I learnt a lot from each of you and after each interview I came back to my work re-inspired and excited by the research process, and even more determined to ensure that your stories are heard. Thanks also to Karen, for your proof-reading and thoughtful comments.

Secondly, I want to express a big thank you to my family. To my children, Dana and Briana, who have been so understanding of Mum's having to work, and to Morgan, and Riley, who came along during the process. Though you have all been a distraction from my work, you have provided so much joy in the journey. To my mother, Barbara Jordan, and my sister, Sue Crabtree, thank you both for your practical and loving support through all the highs and lows, as well as your academic guidance. You have both set the example of learning for me to follow. And to my partner, Martin, thank you for listening to my thinking out loud, and for offering your own (sometimes challenging) perspective. Thank you to you all for your ongoing words of encouragement in this long process and for your never-ending faith in my abilities.

Finally, thank you to Associate Professor Mandy Morgan, my supervisor. I would not have been able to complete this thesis without your support and academic guidance. Many thanks, Mandy, for all your care and understanding, for your belief in my abilities, and flexibility with our timelines.

ABSTRACT

In New Zealand in 2006 there were almost 6,000 men in prison, with predictions that the numbers may rise to 9,000 by the year 2010. Almost a quarter of those imprisoned men reported having a spouse or partner at home, and almost 600 reported one or more dependent children. This means that there are at least 2,500 women and children in New Zealand who are directly affected by the incarceration of their man. My aim in this research was to explore the impacts and meaning of imprisonment for those women whose partners are in prison, and thereby to contribute to an understanding of these impacts, stimulate debate, and draw attention to a silenced and undervalued population within our communities.

In-depth, unstructured interviews were used to collect data from six women whose partners were in prison. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed using a narrative approach of inquiry.

Data analysis supports prior findings that the impacts of imprisonment of a partner are generally detrimental to women and families. The women interviewed reported difficulties related to their partners' imprisonment in almost every aspect of their lives: emotional, physical, financial, social and familial. There is currently little social, community, or government support for these women and families, despite the recognition that family well-being is critically important in reducing recidivism. I offer some recommendations for improving the situation for women whose partners are in prison, and make suggestions for future research.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	v
CHAPTER ONE : INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.2. AIM OF THE STUDY	2
1.3. BACKGROUND TO, AND JUSTIFICATION FOR, THE STUDY.....	2
1.4. DECLARING MY POSITION.....	3
1.5. REVIEW OF CHAPTERS	4
1.6. CONCLUSION.....	5
CHAPTER TWO: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....	6
2.1 Introduction.....	6
2.2 Current situation in New Zealand	6
2.3 Effects of incarceration on children and families	11
2.4 Affective responses to loss of a partner due to incarceration.....	14
2.5 Similarities for families facing partner absence for reasons other than incarceration	17
2.6 Social Illegitimacy of grieving for an incarcerated mate.....	18
2.7 Specific Research.....	19
2.8 Some comments on problems/issues.....	22
2.9 Problems of research.....	23
2.10 Conclusion	24
CHAPTER THREE : METHODOLOGY.....	25
3.1. INTRODUCTION.....	25
3.2. NARRATIVE INQUIRY	26
3.3. RECRUITMENT OF WOMEN PARTICIPANTS.....	29
3.4. ETHICS	31
3.5. THE WOMEN PARTICIPANTS.....	33
3.6. INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS WITH THE WOMEN PARTICIPANTS	34
3.7. TRANSCRIPTION OF NARRATIVES	35
3.8. ANALYSIS OF NARRATIVES	36

3.9. CONCLUSION.....	39
CHAPTER FOUR : NEW ZEALAND WOMEN TALK ABOUT THEIR PARTNERS' IMPRISONMENT	41
4.1. INTRODUCTION.....	41
4.2. RELATIONSHIP WITH PARTNER.....	42
4.3. LOSS OF RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS	47
4.4. TAKING CARE OF CHILDREN	48
4.5. TAKING CARE OF HER IMPRISONED PARTNER.....	51
4.6. TAKING CARE OF SELF.....	59
4.7. VISITING EXPERIENCES	62
4.8. OTHER FORMS OF CONTACT	78
4.9. THE 'SYSTEM'.....	79
4.10. DISRUPTION AND WAITING.....	83
4.11. COPING STRATEGIES.....	86
4.12. SOCIETAL IMAGES	92
4.13. CONCLUSION.....	94
CHAPTER FIVE : DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING STATEMENTS	95
5.1. INTRODUCTION.....	95
5.2. THE AIMS REVISITED	97
5.3. THE IMPACT OF IMPRISONMENT ON WOMEN	97
5.4. FUTURE RESEARCH AND RECOMMENDATIONS	100
5.5. PERSONAL REFLECTIONS	102
5.6. LIMITATIONS.....	103
5.7. CONCLUDING STATEMENT	104
APPENDIX A: RESEARCH INFORMATION SHEET	106
APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM.....	109
APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....	110
REFERENCES.....	113