After Prison: Experiences of Women and Employment in Quebec, Canada

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INTRODUCTION

Since its inception, prison was considered by its promoters as the most efficient tool to reform and reintegrate prisoners (Foucault, 1975; Garland, 1985). However, the effectiveness of the use of imprisonment has continuously been the object of criticism, as multiple studies and commissions of inquiry have shown that prison could be more appropriately depicted as a 'school of crime' (Lalande, 2000).

Nevertheless, imprisonment is still presented as a way to rehabilitate prisoners. For instance, according to the *Corrections and Conditional Release Act* (1992), the purpose of the Canadian federal correctional system is:

> The maintenance of a just, peaceful and safe society by carrying out sentences imposed by courts through the safe and humane custody and supervision of offenders; and assisting the rehabilitation of offenders and their reintegration into the community as law-abiding citizens through the provision of programs in penitentiaries and in the community (Corrections and Conditional Release Act,1992, ch.20(3)).

Considering the importance of employment in society, it is easy to see why correctional services supports its mandate by including work programs to make male and female prisoners more 'employable' since most will leave prison one day. Indeed, both the Quebec and the federal correctional systems consider employment as a means to reintegration, but first and foremost as a way of reducing recidivism rates (Brouillard and Sirois, 1996; Gillis *et al.*, 1996; Gillis, 2000).

In addition to assisting prisoners in changing their behaviour, employment is also presented as providing an opportunity to develop marketable skills in the form of work experience and to increase self-esteem, not to mention enhancing the general skills conducive to rehabilitation (ibid). Employment programs for prisoners developed by correctional services also intend to promote a change of their value system in order to bring about more compliant and less anti-social behaviour. Despite the creation of employment programs in and out of corrections, ex-prisoners, like many other marginalized groups,

still experience many difficulties in obtaining and retaining jobs. Many of them are under-schooled and their imprisonment prevented them from developing societal and professional skills. As a consequence, ex-prisoners are generally unemployed, often live on social assistance, and if employed, they are usually underpaid in precarious jobs (Frigon *et al.*, 2003; Strimelle and Poupart, 2004; Strimelle and Frigon, 2007). Moreover, some researchers question the reintegrative use of employment programs in corrections because they consider employment programs to promote "social conformity" rather than true "reintegration" (Otero *et al.*, 2004). The access to the work force is still more difficult for ex-prisoners because they bear the stigma of being an *offender* through their criminal file. The weight of this label often places them at the bottom of the ladder in terms of social desirability and usefulness (Schmitz, 1985; Petersilia, 2003; Combessie, 2004).

The process of obtaining and retaining employment proves very difficult for former prisoners and is particularly hard for women who get out of prison and reintegrate into the community. Research about female ex-prisoners reveals many female prisoners came from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, and that they often suffered different forms of victimization (sexual, spousal, sexist, racist) and have experienced drug-related problems (Blanchard, 2002; Frigon *et al.*, 2003). The obstacles encountered by women in their job search are often personal (e.g. self-esteem, self-confidence, tattoos, dress, language, health), technical (e.g. training, skills, abilities), societal (e.g obtaining credit, personal insurance), institutional and structural (e.g. release process, conditions, numerous counsellors and specialists to be seen, criminal record, obtaining a pardon, stigmatization, feminization of poverty, gendered stratification...) or family related (e.g. children to care for, single parenting) (Hamelin, 1989; Richie, 2001; Blanchard, 2002).

Based on field research conducted with criminalized women, as well as frontline workers and professionals who work to assist them in Quebec, we address the issue of employment and the employability horizon for criminalized women. More specifically, we want to explore how these women define and give meaning to the concept of employment: do they consider employment as a unique way to social reintegration? We also want to understand how their experiences in the criminal justice system affect their job re-entry process after prison and to review some of the existing resources created to help those women to find a job. Are they sufficient and do they really address the needs of criminalized women?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A number of different and interrelated theories inspired our research and analysis. These are: reintegration theories, stigma theories, social capital theory and feminist standpoint theory. The concept of the *social reintegration* of prisoners is central in our research, but it cannot be clearly defined without examining the experiential reality of imprisonment. Ex-prisoners are affected by isolation and marginalization even after release, making it important to begin with an analysis of these concepts (Rostaing, 1997; Combessie, 2004). There are numerous theoretical approaches relating to the processes of marginalization and exclusion (Paugam, 1991; de Gaulejac and Taboada-Leonetti, 1994; Laberge and Roy, 1994; Wacquant, 1999). The works of Robert Castel and his definition of social integration particularly helped us to refine our definition of social reintegration. According to Castel (1995), exclusion and marginalization should not be described as static situations, but rather as dynamic processes. Castel (1994) identifies two major variables which play a major role in the integration process: professional integration and relational integration. The combination of these variables is argued to produce three different phases of integration: when someone has a regular job and entertains stable and significant social relationships, this person is in the 'integration phase'. In the 'vulnerability phase', getting a job and keeping social relationships become problematic. Finally, the 'dissociation phase' indicates a situation where the person does not participate in any productive activity and is socially isolated. Employment, then, is a major component of the reintegration process of people who experienced different forms of dissociation such as ex-prisoners.

In our research, we also consider the role of social and penal institutions as producers of exclusion and marginality (Goffman, 1961 and 1970; Hattem *et al.*, 1982), and the penal stigma attached to imprisonment (Pirès, 1983, Combessie, 2004; Vacheret and Lemire, 2007). According to this perspective, imprisonment changes prisoners' identities and creates a new social category of stigmatized persons: "the ex-prisoners" whose "spoiled identities" will perpetually be tarnished by their experience in prison and the negative label attached to their status (Goffman, 1970). In that sense, prison produces stigmatization and despite its stated rehabilitative purposes, does not help to reintegrate prisoners successfully (Pirès, 1983; Chantraine, 2003; Combessie, 2004).

Social capital theory has also been useful to our research in exploring the role of social connections in the reintegration process of women released from prison. Social capital is a concept that describes resources that are potentially accessible through social networks and contacts (Bourdieu, 1980; Putnam, 1995; Lévesque and White, 2001). According to Putnam (1995), social networks have value and are vital for community and individual well-being. Research has shown that social and interpersonal relationships are vital for women who are released from prison, and that very few women have supportive networks when they left prison (Hamelin, 1989; Eaton, 1993; O'Brien, 2001; Maidment, 2006). Research on the factors influencing exit from welfare or social assistance also focussed on the importance of social capital which plays a predominant role in this process (Lévesque and White, 2001).

Our research is also informed by feminist works which emphasize the importance of analyzing the experiences and the narratives of imprisoned women and which, in turn, highlight the numerous forms of structural oppression they remain subjected to (Carlen, 1983; Hannah-Moffat, 2001; Faith, 2002; Bertrand, 2002; Buck, 2004). Standpoint theory guided our collection and analysis of our data and suggests that researchers collect stories and narratives produced by women to find linkages between them and they create a coherent whole (Harding, 1986; Comack, 1999). The knowledge produced is then perceived as knowledge *about* women and *for* women, and aims to change society and social relationships. In that sense, the standpoint approach helps to create competing discourses and to listen to the voices of criminalized women who are still largely silenced in the correctional system (Comack, 1999; Shantz, 2008).

METHODOLOGY

We conducted 35 semi-directive interviews. Interviewees included women incarcerated at four federal and twelve provincial prisons, as well as five halfway houses (5). We also interviewed fourteen staff members working at various federal and provincial facilities, and halfway houses in Quebec. As part of our investigation we organized two focus groups comprised of twelve staff members at detention facilities, halfway houses, correctional services and organizations specializing in labour force development. Given the objectives of our research, our attention was mainly focused on the

women's sample. Nonetheless, interviews with the staff were useful in our research initiative because they provide us with staff views on the issue of employability for women prisoners, clarified certain areas of reflection and analysis, and enabled us to verify the appropriateness of some of our questions and our findings. Interviews with professionals constitute in that sense "a subjective secondary knowledge source" (Shantz, 2008, p. 58). They do not necessarily share the same ideas and same views of their 'clients', but they may have a different understanding of the social challenges to which the women will be confronted when they will return to 'normal life'. In our sense, this secondary source offers a more complete picture of the situation.

For legal reasons, we had to submit our research project to the federal and provincial correctional services. After approval, some identified contact persons who contacted prisoners and asked them to participate in our research voluntarily. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim to make it easier to analyze the areas addressed in the field investigation. The interviews were then read, annotated, and summarized using individual analytical sheets reproducing the comments of the interviewees and listing them under each main area. The final step of the analysis (horizontal analysis) consisted in gathering the interviewees' comments on each subject, selecting them according to relevance and presenting and commenting on them.

Given the time frames for the research and institutional imperatives, we were unable to interview Aboriginal women because the institutions taking part in this research were unable to provide us access to this group of women (Public Safety Canada, 2008). Despite these limits, we believe that our research will help to better understand the needs of a significant number of adult female prisoners and ex-prisoners related to employment.

Women who participated in the research were between 23 and 50 years old.[1] More than two-thirds of the interviewees had children. Seventeen women had completed the first to the fifth year of high school. Their sentences ranged from three to 60 months, with one woman having been charged but not tried, two with life sentences and one who had completed her sentence. Thirteen women had received sentences of less than twenty months, and five women had received sentences from 25 to 60 months. The offences varied greatly, but seven were serving provincial sentences for shoplifting.

The job experiences of the interviewees were quite diverse: ten women had held more than three different types of jobs prior to imprisonment.

The jobs were concentrated in the service industry (e.g. secretary, waitress, babysitter, cashier, sales clerk). All of the women had held either stigmatized or employment deemed illegitimate at some point in their trajectories, predominantly dancing in bars, sex work and selling drugs. Twelve interviewees had been on Employment Assistance[2] and four had received Employment Insurance[3] benefits prior to their incarceration.

The remainder of this paper will be divided into three sections. The first provides a brief overview of the situation of incarcerated women and employment in Canada and Quebec; the second explores the central themes emerging from our field investigation; and the third presents the possible avenues which would positively improve the employment policies designed for criminalized women.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE SITUATION OF INCARCERATED WOMEN IN CANADA AND QUEBEC

Over the past 20 years, the proportion of incarcerated women in provincial and territorial institutions in Canada has increased from five percent to nine percent, and in federal institutions from three to six percent (Frigon *et al.*, 2003). Although the population of men incarcerated is considerably higher than women (e.g. in 2003-04, 386 women were sentenced to Canadian federal penitentiaries compared with 7,308 men (CSC, 2005)), research indicates that the number of federally incarcerated women in Canada increased by approximately 75 percent from 1981 to 2002 (Beattie, 2006).[4] There was also considerable "ageing" of the federal women in corrections since 1981. The proportion of criminalized women under the age of 25 decreased from 25 percent in 1981 to 15 percent in 2002 and the proportion of criminalized women over 25 increased from 75 percent in 1981 to 85 percent in 2002 (CSC, 2002; Shantz, 2008). The recent statistics produced on adult correctional services in Canada also indicates that nearly one-third (30 percent) of women admitted to corrections are Aboriginal (Beattie, 2006; Public Safety Canada, 2008).

Despite a decrease in the overall police-reported crime rate in Canada, the incarceration rate continues to climb steadily. The rise in the number of incarcerated women is not a phenomenon unique to Canada. A number of European countries, Australia and the United States have also witnessed increases, sometimes dramatic ones, in the

prison population in general and for women in particular. The war on drugs and zero tolerance policies have been designated as some of the key factors contributing to this rise (Cook and Davies, 1999; Snider, 2003). Analyzing this phenomenon, Maidment (2006, p. 26) notes that "women are most notably affected by neoconservative and neoliberal strategies that have waged wars on drugs and welfare in Canada". This situation explains the over-representation of racialized, poor women, as well as women with mental disabilities in Canadian prisons (Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies, 2005; Maidment, 2006; Frigon and Duhamel, 2006). Due to the erosion of social programs and the offloading of government responsibilities onto individuals, Maidment argues that the increase of incarceration rates is a manifestation of the expansion of the "prison industrial complex" which is first preoccupied by the pursuit of profit and which favours the expansion of prison populations (ibid, p. 27). In that sense, the rise of incarceration should not be viewed as the effect of increased levels of crime but as the result of the corporatization of prisons.

If we look more closely at the characteristics of women incarcerated at provincial facilities and federal institutions in Quebec as a whole, Trevethan (1999) reveals that the women concerned are less than 35 years old in 61 percent of cases at the provincial and territorial level, and in 57 percent of cases at the federal level, and that most of them are unattached (single, separated, divorced or widowed). More than 20 percent of them are Aboriginal. On average, they have nine years of schooling and they are largely unemployed at the time of admission. Women under provincial or territorial responsibility are sentenced for drug-related offences, theft and fraud (Trevethan, 1999). For federal prisoners, Cyrenne (2002) notes that with respect to offences, more than 65 percent of female prisoners are serving sentences for violent crimes (murder, armed robbery, manslaughter or assault), while 35 percent of female prisoners committed crimes that did not directly involve violence (drug related offenses).

Approximately one-third of federal female prisoners are serving prison terms of less than three years, with life or indeterminate sentences in approximately 19 percent of cases. For provincial prisoners, the average lengths of sentences are approximately 81 days (Frigon *et al.*, 2003, p.10). A recent Corrections and Conditional Release Statistical Overview (Public Safety Canada, 2007, p. 85) also notes that women

under federal jurisdiction served a lower proportion of their sentences than men before being released on parole. According to Cyrenne (2002), federally incarcerated women on parole are different than men in the following ways: women are more likely to be granted full parole.[5] They are also more likely to be considered in the *low risk* category and their *reintegration potential* seems higher than it does for men.

In Canada, a federal initiative to investigate the conditions of women in prisons, *Creating Choices: Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women*, was designed in 1990 to develop research on women's imprisonment and to develop alternatives to incarceration (Pate, 2002; Maidment, 2006). The report recommended the opening of numerous community centres for women on parole, halfway houses and Aboriginal centres. It should be noted that there remains too few services offered to women under community supervision to meet their needs, as attested eloquently by the Auditor General of Canada's report on the reintegration of women offenders (2003). For provincially sentenced women, the lack of resources makes it even more difficult to satisfy the needs of a population whose specific characteristics – short sentences, numerous returns, *revolving door* problem – nonetheless appear to call for more suitable programming (Frigon *et al.*, 2003). Despite a number of noteworthy reforms, there is still a great deal of room for improvement in the situation for women prisoners in Canada and particularly in terms of their employment needs after prison (Bloom, 1999; Gillis, 2000).

PATHWAYS TO REINTEGRATION THROUGH EMPLOYMENT

Three areas of analysis will constitute the next section of this article: the profiles of women, their perceptions of work, and the challenges of employability intervention with women according to the workers we interviewed.

Profiles of Women

A number of the workers[6] interviewed commented on the extent to which women prisoners had experienced and were still experiencing multiple problems that made them vulnerable, and that hinder and even prevent them from going back to work after release, as Stephanie, a provincial

caseworker illustrates: "I find the girls have layers of suffering that pile up on top of one another". The majority of the women detained at federal and provincial facilities experienced or are still experiencing various problems associated with drug use. Aside from substance abuse, health problems, and particularly mental health problems, being on employment assistance for long periods of time, as well as resorting to illegal activities for varying periods also characterize the profile of many women prisoners, as also documented by other studies on incarcerated women (Trevethan, 1999; Frigon and Duhamel, 2006).

The role of the family and children is also a key element in the lives and concerns of incarcerated women. Darianne, a federal caseworker working with women explains:

> The women have children and they feel responsible, as compared with a man who is incarcerated, who won't feel responsible in the same way. A woman will find her time in prison more difficult because she always has one foot outside. In her head, she always has one foot outside because she has children, because she feels guilty. The guilt is often there.

In addition to losing contact with their children and their partners, many incarcerated women have also lost their housing, their furniture and their material goods, a situation which creates further stress once they are released. Roxy describes the burden of trying to start all over again:

> And then, when you're back outside, you've lost everything, you're all alone, you've lost your apartment, you've lost your furniture, you've lost everything. You have no address, no welfare. You have no welfare, you have no address. You have to start all over again.

Thinking about their time in prison, but also their pending release, the incarcerated women expressed a need for support and encouragement in their efforts, as Cindy remarked:

> It might be harder for me if I were all alone, but not with some support behind me. Prison can be a good place to be when you're all alone, but on the outside I might give up at some point.

The vast majority of incarcerated women also have low levels of education. Having an incomplete education and in some cases an almost total lack of work experience represent important challenges in terms of entering the labour force.

Women's Perceptions of Work

Work in Prison

The incarcerated women we interviewed considered the jobs they did in prison as a way of earning money, as well as a way of avoiding boredom and idleness. The trades and occupations of the women in prison varied from one person to the next and according to the activities available at the institutions in which they were incarcerated. Many of them complained about the lack of variety, the absence of an educational component in the occupations and the low wages. Edith describes her frustration in this regard:

> On the outside I worked as a cook. Here, when you work in the kitchen, you wash dishes, wash the floors. I'd rather learn something. I know how to wash dishes. There's nothing meaningful about that.

According to some incarcerated women, men have more work opportunities in prison and gain basic experience and knowledge that can then be transferred into the community. Linda talks about this gender-based job segregation: "A man can learn carpentry in prison and use it on the outside. Nothing for us... I hate that. There are no trades to learn in here".

Some of the women were able to obtain more meaningful jobs, like Isabelle, who was then able to draw on the experience acquired in prison to find a job in the community:

> I've always worked. When I was in provincial custody, I worked at the library. In federal prison, I worked in food services for a year-and-a-half, I was a grocery clerk, I was a cook. Then they offered me a chance for a work release at a women's centre. I was there for a year. I worked at the reception and did administrative support, among other things.

The work experience acquired during incarceration is often overlooked by the women themselves. Counselling federal prisoners, Darianne thought

that women could include this experience in their work history, since it is actual work experience:

> Work experience in prison is still work experience – you can't make it up, and it's still experience they have acquired. We have some clients who've spent their lives in prison, so you have to count what they've done as work experience. Many of them don't realize it can be valid work experience.

Here it seems that dissonance exists between what women and frontline workers define as 'work experience'. We already mentioned that frontline workers develop ideas which do not necessarily mirror the experiences and values of imprisoned women. In that sense, frontline workers may know the current requirements of the labour market and prepare women more adequately to meet them. Women's needs in terms of education and vocational training are then secondary, because they do not necessarily fit with the market demands. They also define job experience differently. To the professionals, work done in prison can be evaluated as a job experience, whereas women imprisoned view it in a different way. To them, a job in prison is mainly to pass the time and is meaningless, because it does not help produce more substantial skills they could use once released from prison. Frontline workers seem to develop a more practical and utilitarian idea of employment. Whereas imprisoned women are longing for more significant and appropriate educational and vocational training programs in prison.

Work after Prison

For some women, having a job also represents a way to rebuild their self-confidence after release. In that sense, employment is not only of economic interest, it can also help to improve their psychological well-being. Women who were able to have gratifying work experiences before their incarceration considered these experiences as ways of enhancing self-esteem and pride. Linda described her first job experience in positive terms:

> I was able to go back to store D, and I've never been so proud of myself in my whole life. I started working after more than 20 years. I worked as a cashier all day. I loved doing it, I really enjoyed myself.

Some of the women we interviewed also talked about how the jobs they had access to did not really improve their situations, especially when they were able to live much more comfortably from the proceeds of their former illicit activities. For those who were single mothers, the low wages along with day care and travel costs often discouraged them seeking work which offered precarious conditions that did nothing to help them feel better about themselves or even to improve their situation. For these women, it seems that employment as such is not as important as their relationships with their children and their loved ones, which play a significant role. Paradoxically maybe, work also becomes less important when a woman has to deal with more *pressing* concerns, like the need to put a roof over her head – to get off the street.

Obstacles Encountered by the Women During Job-Hunting

The shame, the sense of being stigmatized, and the criminal record are barriers often cited by the women we interviewed. Roxy mentioned that possession of a criminal record narrowed a woman's chance of getting a job:

> It is definitively an obstacle. All they have to do is dial your number and they have your whole life in front of them. I think it's an obstacle for anyone who wants to work.

Female ex-prisoners also noted that they arouse fear, particularly among potential employers. The workers referred to certain concerns that employers may hold: Will she steal from me? Will she be reliable? Will she show up in the morning? Prejudices against prisoners are omnipresent.

For some incarcerated women, the fact of having been in prison and having been criminalized can go so far as to leave a mark on their bodies metaphorically speaking, as well as make their past more visible and create an even greater stigma in the eyes of the outside world. Stephanie, a provincial caseworker, described the fears of some women under her supervision: "Some of the girls ask me: Does it show that I'm a prostitute? Does it show that I have HIV? If you saw me in the street, what would you think of me?" For Josée, who was supervised in a halfway house, the embodiment of stigma is clear: "Yes, definitely, it's as if you had a tattoo". Marie-Sable, who received a one-year suspended sentence, described the burden of bearing a double stigma: as an ex-prisoner and as a person with

mental health problems. She also thought that the jobs criminalized women could get were often underpaid, if not volunteer work:

> First, there's a judgment that's there, that's always there. It doesn't matter whether you have a record for theft or for murder, you have a record, it doesn't matter why... Employment is difficult. The only kind of work you can find here, or that I can find at least, is usually volunteer work... I'd like to have a job that brings in some money, like everyone else. Just because I went to prison, it doesn't mean I deserve to earn six dollars a day. That's just a mockery, it is exploitation.

Others, like Linda, were able to obtain a training certificate, but since it is related specifically to prison, there is little chance it will be useful to her after release:

> The experience they give us here is very good. I got a certificate in printing. I did some sewing. I've done just about everything. With my certificate in printing, the only thing is that when you get outside it will be marked shop L, detention centre, which means you won't really be able to get a job with it. So you have a monkey on your back before you even start. You learn a trade but it doesn't mean you'll get a job on the outside.

The need to lie about one's prison experience, the need to hide one's former identity from new co-workers and employers also make it difficult to return to society and join the labour force. Those who do manage to find a job are constantly afraid of being discovered and then rejected, which makes them very vulnerable and forces them to lead a kind of *double life*. Sheila described her fears in this regard:

> My life was on the street. It was a life of drugs and prostitution. I'm afraid of running into an employer who was one of my customers. You know, those are the things I'm afraid of.

One of the major obstacles experienced by women was their criminal record and the dilemma referred to earlier as to whether or not to reveal its existence. Isabelle commented on this dilemma:

> When you know there's a central registry, when you give your social insurance number and you have a criminal record. It can be difficult to find work and this has to reduce the range of choices. I don't know because I've never experienced it. But yes, it could call up certain prejudices. It's another human being that's hiring you, and you may not feel secure saying yes, I'm a criminal.

For these women, having a good network makes it easier to get their lives back on track. It also helps them get through their incarceration and lessens the shock of release. Jannika mentioned how helpful it was to get in touch with her family

> It helps me that my family comes to see me often. I call my family often; it helps a lot, my little girl... The trailers[7] are a bit more difficult, she comes to sleep here and then she leaves on Sunday. It helps, but it's hard. What helps is to keep busy.

This field investigation involving professionals and incarcerated women shows the extent to which the problems of criminalized women are multi-dimensional. These women are more at risk of experiencing physical and mental health problems, drug addictions, and abuse of all sorts. Moreover, they are less likely to have benefited from formal education, vocational training and work experience.

More often than not disadvantaged from a material, social and vocational point of view, criminalized women also have little self-confidence and are not very aware of their own abilities, particularly where employment is concerned. They also consider work to be of a lesser concern than children, housing and family relations.

This first depiction of women's profiles and discourses on work as well as the obstacles they meet during their job search highlights some interesting issues and debates around social capital and social (re)integration. Many women interviewed are experiencing or have experienced some forms of social vulnerability and disaffiliation, when they leave prison. Indeed they are not integrated through work and their social networks are often rare or non-existent. Medical and mental conditions that emerge before or in prison continue to affect them (Shantz, 2008). The stigma associated with imprisonment is also a major factor of continuous disaffiliation from the labour market.

The concept of work in women's lives seems different when defined by the women themselves and by the professionals. For the women, getting a job is an important need amongst others, like taking care of children, finding a place to live, surviving. Women's views of social integration are multi-dimensional and not only work-oriented. This explains the differences when they evaluate work done in prison. Their view differs greatly from the more practical perception of the professionals interviewed.

Strong social networks also seem to have real value, helping to find programs and services and support communities. Participants noted the roles played by families and friends creating forms of social capital which improve their access to work but also their self confidence and their ability to successfully reintegrate into the community. Research has shown that the absence of strong social relations is linked to failed reintegration (Maidment, 2006; Shantz, 2008) which indicates the importance of social capital in the reintegration process. However, some women interviewed used old and social networks that engage in illegal activities in order to survive or to find money. Does it still constitute a form of social capital, helping them to reintegrate even if their choice of illegal networks can be seen as a negative form of social capital?

Although social capital has been broadly defined as a neutral concept (Bourdieu, 1980), Robert Putnam's work on social capital in American society defines this concept as a producer of "civic engagement", a tool to facilitate co-operation and supportive relations in communities in order to combat social disorders. Putnam (1995) distinguishes between two forms of social capital: 'bonding social capital', which refers to social networks between homogeneous groups of people, and 'bridging capital', which refers to social networks existing between heterogeneous, diverse groups of people such as choirs and sport clubs. This distinction is important because some forms of social capital can lead to negative effects on community, as is the case for some forms of bonding social capital which can favour exclusion and reinforce the existence of marginal group. According to this theory, women who use established social networks exclusively use bonding social capital, which can produce more severe forms of exclusion, because their social networks reinforce their marginal position. Consequently, social capital theory only functions if ex-prisoners use "good" or "legal" resources to reintegrate.

But what if these women would only have access to illegal tools? Do these illegal tools only lead to social exclusion or can they still have positive effects even if they are temporary? According to Edwards and Foley (1998),

social capital is not equally available to all and not all individuals have equal opportunity to access the various forms of capital. For instance, geographic situation and social isolation can also play a major role to facilitate or to hinder access to social resources. The stigma attached to imprisonment can also restrain access to some forms of social capital and social networks. In this perspective, social capital theory coupled with disaffiliation theory tend to confirm that imprisonment contributes to create more disaffiliated, stigmatized persons who have low choices in terms of reintegration because of their personal and institutional trajectories, but also because of the lack of structural and social resources available to them.

Challenges of Employability Intervention with Women According to the Workers

In the previous section we discussed some of the common challenges faced by female prisoners and ex-prisoners, with a focus on their perceptions of work. Below, we discuss employability intervention from the perspective of professionals who work with imprisoned women who also emphasized issues and challenges which women had touched upon.

Different Employability Profiles of Women Prisoners

According to the counsellors we interviewed, women in prison can be categorized in three main groups: women who have a certain amount of work experience because they previously practiced a lawful trade; women who practiced illegal work (or legal and illegal work); and women who have no work experience. In terms of employment, the experiences varied depending on the persons they met with. Some had been able to go to school and accumulate some work experience. However, most of the incarcerated women who worked had unskilled and rather precarious jobs, and their work experience was limited to service industry employment (e.g. waitress, working in bars, cleaning houses) because they had no vocational or technical training to begin with. Lack of confidence and low self-esteem were also identified as key barriers in their search for employment.

Different Forms of Intervention with Women

Many participants noted that job intervention greatly differs when applied to incarcerated men and women. Women are perceived as more vulnerable

in terms of employment because they are assumed to not understand or be unaware of the real issues and needs of the labour market. They also appear to be unaware of their own abilities in this regard.

Some of the professionals felt that men have a different way to find jobs – they seem more aware of the exigencies of the labour market, and pursue more practical and attainable work objectives. It seemed to the workers that men had a better ability to compartmentalize their lives into different units (e.g. employment, housing, women, children, friends), while women had a more holistic approach to life, which often made them vulnerable. When one aspect of their lives was not working, all the other aspects were affected.

These perceptions about women and men should be contextualized in order to better explain differences which are mainly socially structured. Indeed, some researchers have argued that women experienced more hardships than men during their reintegration process, particularly in terms of employment, because they are less likely to find work and the only jobs available to them are mainly casual or part-time, maintaining them in a situation of poverty and social vulnerability (Maidment, 2006; Shantz, 2008; Shantz *et al.*, 2009). While some women may lack some knowledge about job searching and the labour market, their vulnerability is not only personal, it is also created by the social conditions and the responsibilities they have to face when they return to society. As caregivers, women must face urgent problems such as reconnecting with their children and taking care of them. Such responsibilities are rarely taken by men and interfere with women who are seeking employment (Harm and Phillips, 2001; Richie, 2001; Shantz, 2008).

Some workers also felt they needed to adopt a more holistic intervention perspective with women, taking into account all aspects of their lives and not just placing an emphasis on employment. In most cases the question of employment is not the first point addressed during a session. It is often approached indirectly, using an interpersonal approach that avoids value judgments and that takes a woman's other problems into account before the issue of employment is raised. Stephanie, a provincial caseworker, recalled:

> A lot of the time I have no choice. I can't say that I'm going to cover all of the questions I want to raise during the hour I have for the interview because it might take a half-hour to talk about her telephone call to her mother and the confrontation she had or about the letter or the drawing her daughter

> sent her, because they often bring me things they have received and I know we have to talk about it. How they're feeling, their health problems, their worries... I realize that if we don't do this we'll be missing the boat.

Even when the matter of employment is raised, it is necessary to address the woman's other key concerns, such as her children, housing and the abuse she suffered.

The approach also varies according to age. In general, reintegrating older women is different because they have distinct needs and experiences. Research has shown that older women in prison are more likely than young prisoners to lack employment skills and family connections. Their health condition also affects more deeply their reintegration process (Strimelle, 2007; Shantz, 2008). With younger women, specifically those who remain incarcerated for longer periods of time, more effort can be put into training and education. The length of the sentence will also have an impact on the intervention that can begin in prison. As Charles, a federal caseworker, pointed out, women with short sentences often do not put an effort into a career change process knowing they will find it difficult to continue this process once they have been released.

Intervention Difficulties According to the Workers

Working with women brings with it a host of difficulties. For example, at the provincial level, the "revolving door phenomenon" interrupts programming and affects the effectiveness of different interventions. Stephanie explains the challenges faced by professionals who work with provincial prisoners:

> The difficult thing at the provincial level is that the inmates are not necessarily here long enough to be able to complete their schooling. When they come back, which happens often, they can start again and then continue on from where they were.

Also attributable to the revolving door phenomenon, participants discussed how working with this group of women can be emotionally wearing, as they are often touched by all of the suffering these women express. Contributing to this stress is that some of the professionals feel isolated in their work teams because of the scepticism of certain colleagues towards their ability to help incarcerated women reintegrate smoothly. Workers also experienced

difficulties with respect to the combination of the women's expectations and their lack of self-confidence to make personal choices.

Stephanie, a provincial caseworker also notices that some workers in the correctional system are more critical towards imprisoned woman than towards men: "I sometimes notice that people are much harsher towards them. I also notice that some of the workers are harsh". This attitude stems from different factors, such as the belief of some caseworkers that some women often tend to let everything go when they meet a man, thus making it more difficult to foster effective intervention strategies and outcomes. Stephanie highlights this point well:

> Some women are very dependent on their partners and this is often a problem. You get things going and then they find a boyfriend or get back together with a boyfriend who's on the other side. When this happens, they're much more likely to drop everything.

Workers also described another specific challenge they face in their intervention with women: some women may "relapse" into their old habits and lifestyles because of the lack of money and employment. For women who have been involved in illegal work for some length of time, the financial incentive is indeed the strongest attraction, and this obviously constitutes a significant impediment in the process of returning to work. The demands of the labour force are so high for these women, many of whom have no work experience, are uneducated and have a criminal record that they would rather go back to their previous activities as noted by halfway house staffer Huguette:

> It's not easy on the job market. They have all sorts of difficulties: the DPJ [Direction de la protection de la jeunesse] on their back, an abusive spouse, debts and they've never worked before. Imagine what a leap that is!

In counselling women who have worked illegally, it is necessary to take into account all of the advantages associated with such work, which some women prefer to retain rather than engage in activities that are seen as less legitimate but much more lucrative. Even when a woman is thinking about leaving the sex trade (e.g. escort service, street prostitution), it is still seen as a supplement that can enable her to buy a few Christmas presents or

to continue supporting her children. Malika explains her choice of getting involved again in the sex trade:

> It's something I think about when the holidays come around and I really need money, or when I have no money. I'm afraid it might lead me to start using again. But let's say I really need a few $100 bills. I find it goes quickly. Three hours and it's over and I have my money.

Despite the fact that some feminist researchers, activists and experts analyse *sex work* as *labour* (Parent, 1994; Thiboutot, 2001; Parent *et al.*, 2003; ConStellation, 2005), most workers interviewed did not want to validate this approach and preferred transforming and/or transposing illegal employment skills into a legal field. Carole, a federal caseworker, pointed out the necessity of showing that the women have developed skills through their activities:

> I always ask: What is it that you did? How did you go about it? How did it work? Instead of selling your body, what would you like to do? She's always dreamed of selling clothing, of being in marketing.

The problem here also, as we have previously indicated, is to cope with the loss of quick money and be content with more modest wages. The proceeds from their illicit activities are not as great as is often thought, but it is spent very quickly and brings no long-term gain. Working with such clients entails acknowledging the lure of what is beautiful, exciting and pleasurable as well as the economic, emotional and relational dependency of these women.

Despite these intervention difficulties, the women seem to be receptive to specialized employability and job retention services. Nonetheless, a number of obstacles that the women and the workers identified still persist. For instance, many women complain about the fact that employment programs are still largely insufficient and underdeveloped in corrections. Because of the lack of gender-specific programming, women are also often mandated to attend programs that are not centered on their needs. These comments held by the women join a number of criticisms made about work in prison. Prison work is presented by its supporters as an effective tool of social reintegration, allowing the persons detained to acquire professional skills and favouring their personal development. However, independent

studies underlined that correctional job programs are largely insufficient and outdated (Gillis, 2000; Strimelle and Poupart, 2004). Women are still often offered conventional and stereotypical tasks in prison such as household ironing, cooking, sewing and the like, jobs which do not allow them to find better paid or more specialized employment when released.

While recognizing the necessity of widening women's horizons in job-hunting and of targeting better employment intervention practices toward imprisoned women, the workers we interviewed did not question the values of the correctional system in which they work, and the correctional practices they apply. They generally promote a renewal and an improvement of the employability programs, but still believe that tools offered to women can help them to manage better once released.

PROMISING AVENUES FOR THE FUTURE

In our interviews, many themes were explored in relation to the possible avenues for the future including the importance of a network of employers, external resources and the strategic elements to be deployed to insure positive experiences of women and employment. The need for employers is a central element. Huguette, who works at a halfway house, commented on the need to make employers aware of the needs of female prisoners and to create meaningful ties with the community in order to facilitate the transition. It has been proposed that:

> The employability program should be connected to a business. I think it could be encouraging for a woman to know that if she goes for six months of employability training she'll have a job afterwards.

Marc, another professional working as a provincial caseworker with women, noted that there are programs available to help women when they are released and that an employer's good will also plays an important part in enabling them to find work:

> Fortunately, there are still employers who will say: what I'm interested in is your job performance; I don't want to know about what you did before. But this doesn't apply very well in certain sectors.

Despite the fact that the significance of external resources is also a crucial element, few of the women interviewed raised this issue. Some, who had a support network in place upon their release, did not think about the question in specific terms, although they said they were somewhat afraid of going back to the world. For her part, Cindy contacted job search centres specifically intended for prisoners, which she found more comfortable to deal with because these agencies are familiar with the issue of women prisoners:

> I'm less likely to feel rejected. I'll feel more comfortable with them than with a man from Welfare and starting to tell him I only have my third year of high school and about the prostitution and about being in prison.

Others, including Darianne commented on the importance of experiencing success which can encourage employability and job retention as women feel validated, encouraged and reassured: "When they experience success, that's what can help them the most. They feel like they've managed to accomplish something". Isabelle also notes that training is the first essential element that encourages employability and job retention:

> I think it's to a woman's advantage not just to *do her time* but to get some training or develop some skills to prepare for tomorrow. I think there isn't enough emphasis on training and education for women. Sewing underwear is all well and good, but I don't think it's validating, it's not something you can use on the outside... I saw some girls who had no education go to get their grade 11. Unfortunately, the girls go where they can make the most money. They go to sew underwear instead of going to school... Why not give a bonus to encourage them to go to school?

For women contemplating a return to work, Manon, a provincial caseworker, argues that more flexible forms of intervention need to be developed: "I've found by experience that if you're too harsh or rigid with them, they break the contract. It's inevitable". Moreover, the women seem to greatly appreciate being worked with on an individual basis. Getting out of traditionally female sectors of employment also may afford more job possibilities for women prisoners. Sonia commented on women's interest in non-traditional work:

> I realized that non-traditional work interested them. As soon as they open their horizons to something other than working at a plant or a warehouse or secretarial work, they're interested.

Additionally, many women excel in doing meticulous work and welcome possibilities where creativity can be exercised. Since the end of the 1990s, some non-traditional programs were created for women prisoners in Canada. For instance, CSC created dog training programs for women in two federal penitentiaries (Joliette, Quebec and Truro, Nova Scotia). These programs were organized to provide the women with a training opportunity in a form of activity that enables them to develop new skills and that gives them a better chance for their release. It was also used to provide a form of therapy similar to animal therapy. Various initiatives carried out in Quebec (workshops in photography, theatre, dance, writing, art therapy) should also be developed on a wider scale and involve a greater number of women in prison or under supervision. Another key aspect was identified by Sonia: working to foster recognition and transferable skills, and then working to establish ties with employers in the community in order to find jobs they could offer to women who exit prison.

Lastly, as the prisoners and workers we interviewed often noted, bonuses should be given for work in prison, but also for school work and for going back to school.[8] In general, it was agreed that the work should be done during incarceration and continue in the community. All of those interviewed were critical of the lack of connection between the two. In addition, employment programs should be geared to the diverse realities of the women. The well-documented lack of gender-based supports for women in prison is also mentioned by professionals. That is the reason why they have proposed the development of gender-sensitive programs which are necessary, rather than programs designed for men and simply *transferred to* women.

CONCLUSION

In the last decade, reintegration programs for imprisoned women in Canada have begun to develop and, during the same period, the number of women sent to prison has also increased (Pate, 2002). Consequently, we are left to ponder how reintegration initiatives can fulfill their objectives while more and more women will have to face the multiple challenges

associated with their return to society, particularly when they will be job-hunting. Would choosing alternatives to prison and developing more supervising structures in the community be more helpful in terms of employment?

Research on employment after prison also raises questions about the resources that the penal system offers to the persons leaving penal institutions and the way correctional programs envision social reintegration. Since the 1980s, 'The Welfare State' in Canada has increasingly been under attack, and measures of social security and employment assistance have been considerably reduced. Even if access to certain resources and certain forms of assistance are still possible for the individuals in precarious situations, the message delivered to them by the social welfare system is that they must be able to care for themselves (Otero *et al.*, 2004). The logic of the correctional system also rests on the idea that prisoners and ex-prisoners are largely responsible of their own reintegration (Ehrenberg, 1998; Strimelle and Poupart, 2004). In this context, how can women live with all these constraints and carry the weight of their own reintegration without becoming even more vulnerable? Is it enough to display some 'willingness' to find viable solutions?

Moreover, for some feminist researchers, prison cannot adequately meet the needs of the criminalized women given all the legal, social and psychological ramifications and consequences of imprisonment, but also because prison is first of all a bastion of the male culture (Faith, 2002). In light of the existing situation briefly sketched in this article, we conclude that the effectiveness of the penal policies toward criminalized women must be called into question. Despite some improvements, these policies do not succeed in helping imprisoned women but are, nonetheless, maintained. In that sense, our research emphasizes the need to re-think and re-conceptualize those policies by considering women's expectations and experiences. This discussion should also take into account the numerous forms of obstacles that they encounter, by trying to diminish or suppress the structural repressive ideology that negatively impacts their lives and by proposing gender-sensitive alternatives that will benefit women.

ENDNOTES

[1] Women were given fictitious names. We also guaranteed their anonymity and confidentiality.

[2] Employment Assistance Services is a federal program that provides funding to organizations to assist unemployed individuals to obtain and maintain employment.

[3] Employment Insurance provides temporary financial assistance for unemployed Canadians. Canadians who are sick, pregnant or caring for a newborn or adopted child, as well as those who must care for a family member who is seriously ill, may also be assisted by Employment Insurance.

[4] Women sentenced to less than two years of imprisonment are under the supervision of provincial and territorial correctional services. Women who are sentenced to more than two years of imprisonment are under the supervision of federal corrections.

[5] Full Parole is a type of conditional release granted by the National Parole Board in which the remainder of the sentence is served under supervision in the community.

[6] To safeguard the anonymity of the persons we interviewed, as well as the confidentiality of what they told us, we considered a worker to be any person working at the federal or provincial correctional services as a caseworker, program manager or correctional officer, as well as persons employed, as employment counsellors.

[7] Under the *Private Family Visiting Program*, private family visits are allowed once every two months for periods of up to 72 hours per prisoner .Visits take place in special family visiting units – "trailers" – located within the penitentiary reserve in an area that provides as much privacy as possible. Family members eligible to participate in the program are spouses, common-law partners, children, parents, foster-parents, siblings, grandparents and persons with whom the inmate has a close familial bond (see http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/text/fami/visit-eng.shtml).

[8] In 2006, the Correctional Investigator of Canada noticed that federal inmates allowances for work and program participation were the same as in the 1980s, and that this situation has negative effects on the reintegration potential of prisoners, particularly during the initial phase of release (The Correctional Investigator Canada, 2006, p. 18). In 2006, the maximum inmate pay rate was $6.90 per day, but the costs of the products purchased by federal prisoners has dramatically risen. In 1981, the canteen basket cost $8.99 and the same basket now costs $61.59 (Correctional Investigator Canada, 2006).

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