

**Shifting Societal Perceptions of Criminalized Women:  
From Frameworks of Risks and Deficits Towards  
Narratives of Strength and Wellness**  
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**THE PERPETUATION OF HARMFUL  
STEREOTYPES OF CRIMINALIZED WOMEN**

Using an abolitionist perspective based on my lived experience of incarceration, solidarity with other prisoners, and my subsequent doctoral research, this paper will highlight and challenge some harmful misconceptions about criminalized women that are prevalent throughout society, stemming from how we are depicted in popular culture, most media outlets, mainstream criminology texts, public policy reports, and research documents. I argue that to abolish our current prison system and replace it with an approach that is transformative and healing, it is necessary to obtain widespread popular support so that the voting public will put pressure on elected government officials to enact these policy changes. Part of this process involves prison abolitionists, activists, and our allies supporting a strengths-based approach to working in solidarity with criminalized people.

In popular culture much of the media, mainstream criminology, and public policy reports, criminalized women are depicted in extremely derogatory or overly simplistic terms. This narrow and reductionistic perspective leads the general public to believe that we are all damaged, broken, and in need of 'fixing' or we are conversely characterized as manipulative, unruly monsters (Bosworth, 1999; Faith, 2011). In my view, one of the most harmful cultural biases our society perpetuates is the way that prisoners in general, and criminalized women in particular, are perceived. Stereotypes, prejudice, and assumptions are common and normal aspects of being human. Virtually everyone has been guilty of these harmful modes of thinking whether they are aware of it or not. A key issue is whether these thoughts are expressed insensitively, perpetuated, and acted upon. It is important that we as a society critically reflect on our beliefs and assumptions, while leaving our minds open to being challenged and changed. Furthermore, many tend to automatically assume that convicted prisoners must be guilty of harming others and are thus deserving of punishment. I disagree with this harmful

perspective and believe it is so widespread because it is typically the most marginalized, racialized, and oppressed people in society – or those deemed “undesirables” as Angela Davis (2003, p. 16) frames it – who are incarcerated. It is easier to blame others for our problems rather than take responsibility ourselves and actively engage in altering the social conditions that lead women to be criminalized in the first place.

I begin by reflecting on various stereotypes about criminalized women prevalent in the entertainment industry, while suggesting that the mainstream media typically focus on sensationalism and attention-grabbing headlines. Next, I discuss a similar trend that occurs in mainstream criminology and official policy documents. I briefly touch on the increase of the women’s prison populations, particularly federally sentenced women (FSW) in Canada, and proceed to illustrate how the prison system suppresses women’s resistance to injustice. I continue by highlighting the harm of damage-centred research (Tuck, 2009) and depictions of FSW, suggesting that instead, to support social inclusion we ought to employ a strength-based approach in how we view and treat criminalized and incarcerated women based on an ethic of care. Finally, I conclude by explaining how shifting the way we perceive and treat imprisoned and criminalized people from a negative to a strength-based perspective can ultimately support abolitionist goals.

### **A SNAPSHOT OF FEDERALLY SENTENCED WOMEN IN CANADA**

Prisons are inherently gendered institutions (Moore & Scraton, 2014) reflecting and reinforcing socially constructed stereotypes of differences between men and women. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, women have become the fastest growing prison population in Canada (Zinger, 2019), particularly among racialized people and those struggling with mental health issues (Balfour & Comack, 2014; Zinger, 2018). Based on an internal Correctional Services Canada (CSC) study conducted in 2016, 79.2 percent of currently incarcerated FSW have been diagnosed with a mental health issue; among Indigenous women prisoners this figure jumped to 95.6 percent. Approximately 82 percent of FSW exhibited symptoms consistent with a comorbid substance use issue (Brown et al., 2018). According to the Office of the Correctional Investigator (OCI), between 2010 and 2019 the number of FSW in Canada increased by 32.5 percent while the number of

Indigenous women increased by 73.8 percent , making up 41.4 percent of all imprisoned women and 56 percent of the maximum-security population as the previous decade ended (Zinger, 2019).

## **MEDIA SENSATIONALISM AND POP CULTURE STEREOTYPES**

This increase in women’s incarceration has led to a greater public interest and awareness about the experiences faced by imprisoned women, through increased media coverage, entertainment, policy discussions, and academic research about this population. Popular media coverage tends to focus on the outliers, showcasing the most violent cases in attention-grabbing headlines (e.g. Karla Homolka, Elizabeth Wettlaufer, etc.), which typically use gender stereotypes to frame the story (Scott & Kilty, 2016). For criminalized women (such as street level sex workers and substance-users) who do not necessarily commit violent acts but are subject to victimization, research about mainstream Canadian news outlets has shown that media narratives often normalize the violence these women encounter, while producing narrow, unidimensional perceptions of these women which “reinforce themes of deviance” (Hugill, 2014, p. 137).

Most imprisoned women are locked up for petty law-breaking related to poverty and drug-related offences, while only a small minority of women are convicted of violent “crimes” which are often related to survival of abuse (Brooks, 2015; Comack, 2014; Kilroy & Pate, 2011). Furthermore, critical and feminist research with criminalized women in Canada has demonstrated that women prisoners typically have extensive histories of trauma and abuse. For instance, one report indicated that approximately 68 percent of FSW have experienced sexual assault, while 86 percent of this population are victims of some form of physical abuse (Sapers, 2015). While these diverse needs and characteristics of imprisoned women are important to document and be aware of, this does not provide a comprehensive framework of who we are as whole persons. Women’s identities are complex and dynamic, shifting over time and place while adapting to changing contexts. Perhaps it is this monumental challenge of accurately capturing the complexity of incarcerated women’s identities which makes the use of simplistic stereotypes so widespread and appealing.

Reflecting on how incarcerated women are depicted in the popular culture entertainment industries of fictional television series and film, the perpetuation of stereotypes is extremely evident. For example, throughout season one of *Orange is the New Black* (2013) the show depicts each ethnic group as a cultural stereotype – the loud, rowdy Black woman, the uneducated, illiterate red neck, white trash girl, the brusque, aggressive, emotionless Russian, and the sexy, shallow Latina. In the show, all these groups of women are self-segregated or racially sorted. While this does happen in American prisons (Lopez-Aguado, 2018), in my experience of women’s provincial and federal institutions in Ontario, I have not encountered this. For the most part, women associate with whomever they want, although there are some prisoner-run ethnic social groups in the federal women’s prisons. Also, the idea of prison families with women taking on different gender roles is not a common occurrence in Canada. Groups of friends may be close and consider one another like family, but they do not create a nuclear, heteronormative family. In terms of general stereotypes, the show depicts rude, aggressive prisoners and the threat of constant violence, fights, and arguments, which is an exaggeration. Most of our time in prison consists of daily routines and long stretches of quiet boredom, with prisoners engaged in activities such as reading, sleeping, watching television, playing cards, work, and programs. Furthermore, research concerning violence inside women’s prisons has indicated that most violence perpetrated in these facilities is directed towards the self, while men prisoners typically direct violence outwards at other prisoners or staff (Moore & Scraton, 2014).

There are also some moments of truth depicted accurately in *Orange is the New Black* (2013), such as new prisoners feeling scared, the challenges of staying connected to loved ones in the community, and the uncomfortable visiting process. While much of prison life is boring and stressful or unsafe, there are also times when prisoners have fun – laughing, dancing, singing, and joking around helps the time pass. In episode six of season one of the show we see an example of how prisoners can adopt the neoliberal correctional discourse of responsabilization, which is central to prison programming (Hannah-Moffat, 2004). This was depicted as Piper remarks to a friend visiting: “I committed a crime. Being here is no one’s fault but my own” (*Orange is the New Black*, 2013).

As a final example on this issue of depicting criminalized and imprisoned women in popular entertainment, I will draw your attention to some

commonly held stereotypes framed by several commercially successful Hollywood film productions: The 1991 classic drama *Thelma & Louise* (Scott, 1991) starring Geena Davis and Susan Sarandon; the prison drama *Brokedown Palace* (Sigel, 1999) starring Clare Danes and Kate Beckinsale; and the 2003 biographical drama *Monster* (Jenkins, 2003) based on true events featuring Charlize Theron and Christina Ricci. Each of these movies focus primarily on sex, drugs, and violence. The female leads depict common assumptions about women who commit crimes. For each pair there is one woman who is naïve, weak, vulnerable, and easily manipulated by men. The other female character is depicted as strong-willed, violent, aggressive, and independent; all of which are words that are frequently used to describe criminalized women in real-life.

## **A DISCONNECT BETWEEN OFFICIAL NARRATIVES AND LIVED EXPERIENCE**

Following the completion of a federal prison sentence, I decided to pursue a doctorate in criminology. Similar to observations from popular media outlets and the entertainment industry, it became clear that the mainstream criminology literature has also neglected the experiences of criminalized women, grounding its theoretical claims with men as the “norm” and emphasizing damage-centred narratives that frame criminalized women as weak and vulnerable (Comack, 2014; Davis, 2003; Hannah-Moffat, 2001; Moore & Scraton, 2014). When issues facing criminalized women are distinguished from those of men in research, we are typically framed within a patriarchal worldview consistent with hegemonic assumptions of passive femininity and gender stereotypes, thus neglecting our strength and diversity (Bosworth, 1999; Hannah-Moffat, 2001; McCorkel, 2003). In response to this disconnect, part of my doctoral work involves exploring how media, research, practice, and policy approaches to understanding the experiences of criminalized women result in a chasm between the representation and realities of our everyday lives.

As in research, texts produced by prison systems often produce harm, as the system is primarily focused on managing and reducing individual-level risk factors without acknowledging our strengths or the structural problems underlying our experiences. With the exception of some critical and feminist literature that has challenged or brought attention to these

harmful labels (e.g. Law, 2012; Faith, 2011; Pollack, 2004, 2007, 2010, 2012), criminalized women are typically framed in a negative and deficient manner, especially those prisoners who resist hegemonic assumptions of femininity (Law, 2012). These marginalized women are labelled dangerous, unruly, monsters, aberrant manipulators, nasty girls, deviant criminals, and misfits (Comack, 2014; Faith, 2011; Moore & Scraton, 2014; Neve & Pate, 2005) or conversely characterized as troubled girls who are emotionally damaged or out of control, flawed, dysfunctional, scared, weak, and vulnerable (Bosworth, 1999, p. 59; McCorkel, 2004, p. 395). Such harmful labels serve to pathologize women, highlighting the prevalence of our needs, risks, and deficits. Additionally, this dominant discourse positions the state and its legal system as the paternalistic figure that is necessary to ‘fix’ or ‘correct’ our deficient thoughts and behaviours. While prison system rhetoric claims to ‘rehabilitate’ prisoners and support ‘pro-social behaviour’ and ‘community reintegration’, the punitive and retributive approach used by the penal system contributes to the further traumatization of women. Texts produced both by prison staff and researchers tend to overlook the reality of our lived experiences as criminalized women. This is unsurprising as these documents are often produced without our active involvement.

### **CENTRING DAMAGE IGNORES HOW PRISONS PUNISH WOMEN’S RESISTANCE**

Highlighting the strength and solidarity of criminalized women is particularly important in a context where institutions actively suppress women’s capacity to engage in solidarity and care work. Research that ignores the strengths of criminalized women will inevitably overlook institutionalized efforts to suppress solidarity in action. Examples of this suppression include prisoners not being allowed to share or trade food or personal belongings, visit a friend’s living unit, or peacefully protest and resist our conditions of confinement, thus inhibiting our capacity to care for each other (de Graaf & Kilty, 2016; Fayer & Payne, 2017; Law, 2012). Our inability to engage in these everyday acts of care limits the strength of our collective resistance. It follows that the absence of positive or strengths-based literature concerning criminalized women contributes to our oppression, stigmatization, and social exclusion. Based on my own lived experience of incarceration and my current academic research on this topic, I argue that this paternalistic

treatment and narrow conceptualization of criminalized women is harmful and the prevalence of “damage-centred research” (Tuck, 2009, p. 409) ought to be balanced with asset-oriented literature which highlights our strengths, talents, and resiliency.

In carceral settings, personal relationships are also subject to surveillance and social control, and same-sex intimate relations among incarcerated women are frequently punished or stigmatized by staff (Fayter & Payne, 2017; McCorkel, 2003). For any of these seemingly harmless actions, prisoners can receive institutional charges which result in punishments including monetary fines, an increased security classification, or placements in segregation (Fayter & Payne, 2017; Glaremin, 2011), all of which can delay our eligibility for parole. Based on my lived experience, there is a disconnect between the laws governing CSC and their practices. Prison staff actively suppress positive and strength-based actions of prisoners, while simultaneously facilitating harmful coping strategies. For example, placing women with mental health issues in solitary confinement (Bingham & Sutton, 2012), isolation from family and friends in the community due to the high cost of phone calls, stamps, and an inaccessible visitation program are linked to acts of self-harm, suicide, drug abuse, and unhealthy eating habits (Chamberlen, 2018; de Graaf & Kilty, 2016; Dell, Desjarlais, & Kilty, 2011; Kilty, 2011; Law, 2012; Sapers, 2013; Zinger, 2018), ultimately acting as barriers to successful community re-entry and decarceral interventions. Essentially, the penal environment is designed to “diminish initiative, punish resistance and undermine potential” (Moore & Scraton, 2014, p. 50).

### **TOWARDS INCLUSION: ATTENDING TO CONTEXT AND COMPLEXITY**

Despite the good intentions of researchers who zero-in on our suffering with the aims of increasing access to support and resources, depicting us in a negative, unidimensional manner offers an incomplete picture – further contributing to our stigmatization and oppression. While it is necessary to accurately document the realities of incarcerated women’s needs, we must be careful not to use these facts to frame women as deserving of poor treatment. Rather than viewing women prisoners as simply vulnerable and needy, it is necessary to highlight the real social causes of incarceration such as poverty, violence against women, and a lack of access to much-

needed resources including housing, employment, and education (Comack, 2014; Roberts, 2017). These structural roots of women's criminalization have been systematically ignored by Canada's penal system (Chartrand & Kilty, 2018).

Cultural discourses constituting women as overly emotional and inherently weak have critical implications for the embodied nature of imprisonment and women's capacities to cope with and resist their oppression. Recent research has shown that essentialist depictions of women as weak and vulnerable are linked to self-injury and suicide among prisoners. Countering harmful constructions of womanhood, Chamberlen (2018) found that women's self-harming behaviour in prison reflects these structural constraints of personal identity, serving an expressive function for women to affirm their self-determination and embodied agency within a highly restrictive prison environment. In a similar manner Razack's (2015) study of Indigenous deaths in custody highlights how discourses of vulnerability situate the problem onto the body of the victim rather than the harmful, oppressive state practices of isolation and punishment.

Additionally, while there may have been a role for damage-centred research in the past (Tuck, 2009), there is now a vast body of literature covering the challenging or difficult aspects of criminalized women's existence. Continuing to highlight our limitations, vulnerabilities, and experiences of trauma, mental illness, poverty, and addiction causes harm to our self-esteem and identities as we view ourselves as weak and damaged. This one-sided depiction highlighting the brokenness of marginalized communities stems from the perspective of outsiders, rather than the voices of those with a lived experience of incarceration. In my experience, criminalized women are often harmed by research and prison programming that frames them as vulnerable victims (Ministry of Justice, 2018; Pollack, 2005, 2007, 2010, 2012), rather than complex, strong, complete human beings. Going forward, I believe that research with and about criminalized women should depathologize our experiences so that we can be seen as more than simply damaged, vulnerable, broken, and needy (hooks, 1990; Tuck, 2009). Involving more people with a lived experience of incarceration in the research process, from the initial approval stage to data collection, analysis, and reporting findings is one way to begin this de-stigmatizing work. In discussions with other criminalized women about the literature written



about us (and frequently without us), my peers have expressed similar sentiments. No one wants to be perceived negatively or as a weak, passive victim. Stereotypes are dehumanizing and incomplete, reducing our identities into a single choice or action. It is time for us to shift away from these harmful and damaging frameworks.

I believe that shifting the way criminalized women are perceived can support community inclusion, prevent further incarceration, and ultimately strengthen our communities by helping the general public become more open to abolitionist philosophies. Most readers of this journal are familiar with the myriad negative characterizations of criminalized women in the media, academic literature, and policy arena that I touched on earlier – I am not going to engage any further with those narratives here. Instead, I wish to bring attention to the importance and value of asset-based research, and highlight some areas of our strength and resilience.

### **STRENGTH-BASED APPROACHES AND REINTEGRATION: AN ETHIC OF CARE**

As I suggested above, rather than facilitating and supporting “reintegration”, federal statutes, regulations, policies and practices (e.g. *Corrections and Conditional Release Act*, *Corrections and Conditional Release Regulations*, etc.) typically result in precarious living situations while on conditional release, where carceral control extends beyond the prison (Balfour et al., 2018) and is characterized as “doing time on the outside” (Maidment, 2006) or “echoes of imprisonment” (Shantz et al., 2009, p. 85). To address these concerns, in recent years a strengths-based approach to community re-entry has emerged which is centred on the potential positive contributions to society that former prisoners can offer. Conceptualized as an “anti-pathologizing approach” (Maruna & LeBel, 2003, p. 98), this asset-oriented practice is concerned with strengthening the capacities of people who have experienced criminalization and imprisonment instead of repairing their perceived deficits (Maruna & LeBel, 2015).

Strength-based community re-entry is grounded in an ethic of care. Fundamentally differing from traditional community re-entry approaches, a strengths-based approach conceives of former prisoners as talented, capable individuals who can provide valuable contributions to society (Maruna & LeBel, 2015). This involves supporting criminalized women in

building their strengths, connecting them to various networks of support, and facilitating community connections so that women and their families have safe, affordable housing and a living wage – key actions that prison abolitionists such as Angela Davis have called for (Davis, 2003, 2005, 2012). This requires us to redirect public spending towards building healthy communities, rather than more prisons. Abolitionist theorists assert that to facilitate inclusive, creative social justice opportunities in pursuit of a world without prisons, as a society we need to stop supporting and relying on carceral solutions for addressing social problems (Chartrand & Kilty, 2018; Mathiesen, 2015). This simple shift in perspective can help ensure that marginalized people have equitable access to valuable resources, which in turn can enhance community safety and well-being for everyone.

There are multiple benefits of adopting a strength-based approach for criminalized women and their families (e.g. reducing stigma makes it easier for women with a criminal record to find work and secure housing; improved mental health; decreased risk of substance abuse and addiction; improved confidence and self-esteem), along with some clear positive implications for the wider community. Criminalized women have much to offer society and possess many positive traits, talents, and skills that can be shared with the community. I argue there is significant value to the prison abolition movement in terms of mobilizing a strength-based research and intervention approach, as well as transforming the general public's negative perceptions of criminalized women. As long as we are perceived as the "other" and not valuable members of society, we will continue to be pushed to the margins and unable to actively contribute to social change efforts.

### **WHAT STRENGTH-BASED APPROACHES OFFER TO ABOLITION**

I believe that if we hope to gain the widespread public support that is essential to abolish our punitive, retributive legal system and replace it with a more inclusive, healing, and transformative approach to justice (Morris, 2000; Sawatsky, 2009, 2018), we must first shift cultural attitudes about criminalized and imprisoned women. Prison justice activists, penal abolitionists, and our allies ought to support a strengths-based approach to research, interventions, and activism through radical solidarity with criminalized people. Radical solidarity entails creating a community of

support that accepts and celebrates diversity in a manner where a plurality of perspectives is welcomed, and people can critically engage with one another without having to suppress their differences (Law, 2012; Medina, 2013). Recognizing our shared experiences of oppression, while valuing individual and cultural differences, solidarity involves collaboratively building and supporting one another's strengths and assets at the individual, relational, and collective levels (Rieger, 2017), while attempting to reduce inequities and promote social justice. Shifting away from harmful stereotypes can be achieved by replacing those perspectives with narratives about women's strengths, health, healing, and wellness.

Despite extensive histories of trauma and abuse that are reproduced and exacerbated by the prison system, criminalized women possess many skills, strengths, and assets, which are exemplified through various programs and initiatives led by current and former prisoners inside carceral institutions and the community. A clear example of FSW's resiliency and relational capacities was the creation of the first Prison for Women (P4W) Peer Support Team in 1990, after four Indigenous women died by suicide within a two-year span (Stewart, 2002). There are also Peer Support programs in the current regional women's prisons (Pollack, 2008), although the program was cancelled by the prison administration at Grand Valley Institution (GVI) for several years while I was incarcerated there. Some other prisoner-led initiatives that exemplify women's strengths include the now defunct Lifeline program (Olotu et al., 2009), the Walls to Bridges Inside and Community-based Collectives (Fayter, 2016; Pollack, 2019), academic publications written by current and former prisoners (e.g. *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*; Pollack, 2019), Human Rights Advocacy Program (in partnership with the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies), Strength in Sisterhood Society (Auger et al., 2003), Long-term Inmates Now in Community (LINC) and Emma's Acres,<sup>1</sup> and the P4W Memorial Collective<sup>2</sup> (Guenther, 2021).

This vision of strength-based community building can be realized if we reframe the way criminalized women are represented and treated in society. The dismantling of the welfare state and the entrenchment of a neoliberal ideology characterized by hyper-individualism has allowed the state to justify eliminating a social safety net with the widespread message that people are responsible for their own lives (Roberts, 2017). There is certainly a danger of those in power adopting these proposed strength-based narratives as an

additional means to deny responsibility for providing services. To avoid this continued pattern of ignoring the needs of incarcerated populations, it is critical that we mobilize the general public and politicians via the media, pop culture entertainment, and academic research to highlight the precarious living situations of criminalized people as being due to their marginalized position in society. Women with a lived experience of incarceration must be seen as deserving of support and assets to the community. While I do not advocate for ignoring the real needs of current and former prisoners, I suggest this area of research and action be balanced with a strength-based approach that recognizes our value to society. Shifting to strength-based approaches will strengthen our communities by providing comprehensive care for every community member from childhood onward, while also promoting social relations built on healing processes. This can only be accomplished with the leadership and involvement of criminalized women who have expert knowledge about spaces of incarceration, as well as the conditions necessary to abolish them.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See <https://lincsociety.bc.ca/>.
- <sup>2</sup> See <https://p4wmemorialcollective.com>.

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