

Prisoners are Women too: A Case Study of Women Prisoners at Westville Prison

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Prisons are institutions that intrigue. Like asylums, they are defined by what Goffman (1961) referred to as their 'totally closed' nature. Incarceration and deprivation of liberty have long been thought of as deterrents to violators of the law or to potential violators of the law. As opposed to physical punishment for serious criminal offences, physical isolation came to be regarded as the solution to the problem. According to Wolfgang (1979:1), each of the rationales of punishment – revenge, retribution, expiation, deterrence, reformation and social protection - has influenced the development of others. The central point for each rationale has been the prison. While society endlessly recites themes of democracy and liberty, prisons act as constant reminders of society's foibles.

The prison system is an integral element of the South African criminal justice system, which has loomed over the social system like a spectre, interfering with and offending our sense of equality and equity. South Africa has a notorious record for its large prison population, its high incarceration rate, low conviction rate, its conveyor belt justice, and its overpopulated prisons, not to mention the cloak of secrecy surrounding prison life.

Armed with this dismal image of prison, many researchers have undertaken criminal studies, focusing on prison life and the male prisoner. These studies have broadened the scope and understanding of prisons in our society, but they remain concerned with the activities and interests of men. Women's prisons have long been shrouded in secrecy, and female prisoners have been regarded as non-existent entities. Feminist criminology began as a refutation of male monopolisation of the academic discipline. Women were scarcely regarded as worthy of attention. When they were discussed, they were dismissed with scornful sexist views. Feminist criminology used this as a basis for argument – and proceeded to dispel other stereotypical myths about women, the most important being their assertion that there is no such thing as the 'typical female criminal', or 'a new type of female criminal'.

Women offenders occupy various positions in society and come from a variety of backgrounds. To persist in searching for a single, monocausal theory of women's criminality, as is implicit in some theories, is limiting. To further persist in finding explanation by reinforcing the masculine/feminine dichotomy, serves to echo and project the same mistakes as those postulated by the biological explanations. It is this process and these stereotypes that have affected the incarceration of women, and their treatment in prison.

Aim of this study

This paper explores the peculiar way in which women prisoners adjust to this closed environment, by focusing on a case study of women inmates at Westville Prison in the locality of Durban.

Of paramount importance was an investigation of the experience and effects of imprisonment and rehabilitation of 100 women inmates at Westville Prison. An exploratory study with a focus on the experiences of women prisoners within this confined area was conducted. The research design of this study can best be described as utilising both quantitative and qualitative methods.

The quantitative method yielded the basic demographic and descriptive data. It was necessary to utilise various empirically appropriate techniques such as a study of the prison records, administering of questionnaires, interviews and observation. Consultation of the prison records yielded information about the formal rules of the institution as well as sociological characteristics of the population. Research instruments were also developed to collect data from the institutional administrator and staff in charge of the various prison programmes. These were the observation schedule, administrator-questionnaire and programme interviews. The inmate interview schedule was structured to gather information on biographical characteristics, offence history, work history and participation in institutional programmes. The qualitative method dealt with open-ended questions which involved the inmate's perceptions of prison life, the programmes offered, their attitudes towards other inmates and staff. This type of qualitative research aims to provide 'understanding'.

Selection of Inmate Sample

The type of sample drawn was a stratified systematic sample. Inmates were separated into strata, determined by the length of sentence categories, for example 1-2 years, 2-3 years, 3-5 years. This was done largely to determine the severity of the offences committed, attitudes and experiences of imprisonment in relation to length of sentence, and the programmes offered for inmates in these categories. After this was

done, a systematic sample was drawn within each group, where every n th inmate was selected in the sampling frame, where n represents the same number. In this instance the sampling interval was 5 where every 5th inmate was selected. The total number of inmates during the period of the research (August 1992 – December 1994) was 399.

The presentation of the demographic characteristics of the women offenders provides an important, albeit incomplete, profile of the women incarcerated at Westville Prison. It emerged that Black inmates comprised approximately 88,2% of the total inmate population, and 96,2% of the women who had only a primary level of education were Black. A higher rate of incarceration of Black women raises the important question, according to Glick and Neto (1977:107), of whether 'Blacks were charged with more serious crimes or whether Black women had more problems getting bail of release on their own recognizance'. These figures indicate that the educational level of Black women in prisons is but a microcosm of the educational level of Black women throughout South African society. The percentage of White, Indian and Coloured women with senior secondary education was higher than that of Blacks. Of the total number of Black female offenders, only 21,1% had a senior secondary education. This low rate could be attributed to the fact that many Black areas lack high school facilities. Further, education has long been regarded by Blacks as an expensive commodity. Also, there is some evidence that there was a prevailing attitude among Blacks for decades that education was more relevant for boys than girls. These factors meant that girls were denied access and the right to education. This attitude has only recently changed (Meer 1984:90).

To provide a complete profile, it is the women themselves who provide information about their needs, wishes, views of the people with whom they share their lives in prison, as well as their thoughts on prison as a rehabilitative institution.

Differences amongst women prisoners do exist. Different prisoners have varied perceptions of imprisonment. These depended upon the inmate's prior criminal record, educational and economic background, the prison job she occupied, her adjustment to prison life and the inmate social system.

The punishments which were inflicted upon women in previous centuries (branding, whipping, etc.) no longer form part of attempts to manage or control women inmates. Instances of solitary confinement or dietary rations occur less frequently in prisons of recent times.

Despite these seemingly less harsh restrictions placed upon women prisoners now, it would be a serious error in judgement to assume that the lot of the female prisoner has been eased. It would be a further mistake to assume that society regards the prison as a place of rehabilitation first and foremost rather than primarily as a place of punishment. The conflicting goals of punishment and rehabilitation with which the prison is faced create a dilemma, not only for the prisons but also for the

communities which set these goals. How does one punish and rehabilitate a person at the same time?

However one looks at it, the prison experience is a painful one, and to grasp some vestige of understanding of prison life one must understand the women who live there. This paper provides an account of women's experiences in their own words.

Difficulty in Adjustment

Absence of home and family, and the rules and regulations of prison life, together, proved to be the main aspects of inmates' difficulties in adjusting to life in prison.

The fact that visitation by family and friends is restricted to specified times and all but A-Group prisoners¹ are restricted to non-contact visits is equally restraining. Those prisoners who are allowed contact visits have to endure a body search after each visit. In addition to contact visits, A-Group inmates are also privileged to eat their favourite food which their family or fiends bring for them during the visits. But as *Angie tells it: 'You are not allowed to take the food back with you to your cell. Within those thirty minutes of visiting time, you do not know whether to eat the food or talk to your family. The visits are supervised. They (the prison members) even sit in on my husband's visit'.

Inmate Mothers

Many of the inmates who are mothers have mixed feelings about their children visiting them in prison. A few of the inmates have kept the truth away from their children. *Jane says: 'My child thinks I have a job in another town. My mother sends me photographs of him (he is five years old) and writes to me to tell me how he is. I never want him to know that I am here'. Jane believes that she is protecting her child from unnecessary pain.

In Dorothy's case, her little girl (2 years old) was very traumatised by the first visit eight months ago. Ever since then and acting in accordance with doctor's orders that the girl should not be allowed to visit, *Dorothy has not seen her daughter.

¹ Working from the privilege system, A-Group Prisoners receive additional privileges compared to B, C and D Group Prisoners. These privileges include contact visits, retiring to their cells at 22:00 instead of at 15:30 as for B, C and D Group Prisoners, A-Group Prisoners are also allowed to indulge in their hobbies, read, listen to the radio and watch television. None of these privileges are accorded to prisoners other than A-Group Prisoners.

Many of the inmates admit that they long for a visit from their families, and yet find the experience very distressing when they do see their families. *Thandi, a B-Group prisoner who is not accorded contact visits explains that: 'to look at my children through the glass and not touch them is heartbreaking'. Thandi waived her rights to keep her baby of eight months with her in prison². *Thandi believes that her baby is well taken care of by her mother.

*Babs states that she would rather not have her mother visit her in prison. 'When mum comes to visit, I cannot hug her or touch her. It is difficult to express feelings through a glass and I know that it is tough on her too. So I told her not to come visit. After every visit you come away emotionally drained. I would just rather not go through all that'.

Apart from the visits, the major means of communication between inmates and their families is letters. No restrictions are placed on the number of letters an inmate may receive or send. However all mail, incoming and outgoing, is censored. Many of the women feel that this is an invasion of their privacy. Prison management however, argue that the censoring of mail is important in certain circumstances. For instance, news of death or of serious illness of a family member, or a husband's intention to initiate divorce proceedings and sue for custody of any children are all likely to cause immeasurable pain for the woman.

In *Farah's case, her husband removed her baby daughter from her parents' care and refuses to visit her in prison. He has written to her to tell her that he is getting on with his life and that he would rather have the baby with him. *Farah is angry and frustrated. She says she is helpless to stop him. 'I have spoken to the social worker and she was no help at all. Her advice was that if he does not want to visit, it is his choice. Nobody can force him to'. Farah has since spoken to the psychologist. All she can think of now is getting her child back.

Inability to take charge of, and possibly change events, in their families' lives on the outside is a frustrating position that many of the inmates find themselves occupying. Spousal infidelity, neglect of children, death in the family, all adds to the pressures of doing time in prison.

*Anna tells of the sleepless nights she has worrying about her children. 'All three of my children are living with my aunty [Anna is unmarried, and has no idea where the children's father I]. She [the aunt] is very sickly and does not have a job. When I was there I used to do odd jobs to try and provide for my family. I do not know how they are managing now'.

*Promise's children have never been to visit her. She explains that it is very costly for them to make the trip and they do not have the money to afford to make the

² Inmates have the option of keeping children aged 3 and under with them in prison.

visit. 'I do not have a phone at my home and I cannot write. I think I will ask the social worker to write for me, and find out how my kids are'.

*Beauty's eldest daughter gave birth recently. The baby was very sick and Beauty says 'all I wanted to know was if the baby was all right. I asked the social worker if I could phone home and she refused'.

Controlled by Time

There are many other restraints which collectively serve to further restrict the personal freedom of the inmates. Probably the most pervasive is the fact that in prison every activity is controlled by time. For instance, the early morning wake-up call signals the fact that prisoners have to line up for the parade and morning count and proceed to breakfast in pairs silently, with hands behind their backs. *Angie says of this rule: 'This is something I can never get used to. I am not a child at school. I am a grown woman'.

After breakfast, the women proceed to their appointed places of work. Lunch is at 13h00. At 13h30 prisoners return to their places of work: this mainly applies to those inmates who work in the kitchen, laundry, workshop, crèche and salon. Those inmates who are involved in cleaning chores which they complete before lunch, return to their cells after lunch. 15h00 is lock up for all prisoners except A-Group prisoners who are locked up at 22h00. Those inmates who wish to visit the library have to follow a fortnightly schedule when they are escorted to the library in groups for a specified time period.

Every six months, prison management staff adjourn to review inmates' conduct, address any queries by inmates related to their sentences, or any other grievances that inmates may have. Inmates refer to this meeting of prison staff as 'the Board'. Inmates have to wait to be called before 'the Board', to have their conduct reviewed, or their release dates finalised. Inmates who are in the C-group category of prisoners and whose conduct gains the approval of 'the Board' are then moved to the B-group category and similar procedures apply to the inmates in the B-group category. *Angie was full of scorn for the 'Board', 'all they want from me is to tell them where the money is (Angie is serving a three year sentence for fraud), but I pretend like I do not know what they mean. Why should I tell them?' *Flo, an A-group prisoner says she made three requests to the 'Board' for a single cell. 'They always tell me that all the single cells are full. I do not believe them'.

In addition to having every scheduled activity timed, inmates also spend a lot of time waiting. If an inmate wishes to move from one cellblock to another, she has to wait until a prison warder is in the vicinity to let her through. In the dining hall, no inmate is allowed to speak. Any inmate who wishes to, has to raise her hand and wait until a prison warder is able to attend to her. Those inmates who want to visit

friends in other sections have to wait to obtain permission first before doing so. A familiar sight in the corridors of the prison, is that of inmates laden with shopping bags of groceries, waiting to be let in into some or other section of the prison. Invariably, the waiting depends upon the chance passing of a prison warden who is able to let them into their prison section.

If the inmate would like to speak to a social worker, she has to speak to the prison warden in charge of her section and then wait until an appointment is made for her to see the social worker. But as *Babs put it, 'We all just wait for each day to pass and some days seem longer than others'.

Physical Survival

Physical survival in prison, it would seem, depends almost totally on the inmate's ability to make the necessary transition from making her own decisions outside, to having decisions made for her on the inside. It seems that prison rules and regulations reduce the inmate to an automaton who is incapable of challenging any rule which she finds unreasonable or illogical. Further, while prison staff are adamant that all rules and regulations are explained to each inmate, many of the women dispute this claim. *Pat says: One prison [staff] member tells you to do something one way, and then another member comes along and screams at you for doing it all wrong, and insists that you do it her way'.

For many inmates the deprivation of personal goods and services is demoralising and denies the inmate any form of individuality. At Westville Prison, attempts have been made to allow women to enhance their appearances. The floral materials used for the inmate's dresses are of different shades. Many of the inmates believe that this is the only redeeming feature of the dresses. The dresses were described as 'shapeless', 'unflattering' and 'plain squares'. All inmates are issued standard brown shoes. Inmates are allowed to wear their own underwear, use their own towels and toiletries. [A family member or friend may send these items to the inmate]. *Angie remarks: 'When I was getting ready to come for this interview, one of the Warrant Officer's suggested that I use one of my good outfits. I refused. Why should I get all dressed up? I wanted you to see me like this, in this dress. I would not want to use my lovely outfits here. Everybody will think I am just showing off. My cupboards at home are filled with expensive clothes. I am just waiting to get out of here so I can wear them again. You would not even recognise me then'.

*Angie is equally scathing about the deprivation of the basic necessity that all women are entitled to: 'When you are menstruating, you receive only three pads a day. Can you believe that, only three pads? I bleed heavily, so three pads only last for a couple of hours. But I am lucky, I can afford to buy whatever I need from the shop', Some of the inmates have learned to work around the system to beat this rule. *Angie

elaborates: 'What they do is they take red polish and smear it on the pads to show how heavy they are bleeding [In order to obtain additional sanitary pads, inmates have to show proof that they indeed have heavy menstrual flows.] That is the only way you learn to survive in here, you have to be one step ahead of the rules'.

Almost all of the inmates who participated in the interview made mention of the food served to them. Many complained that the fixed daily allowance of food served to them was insufficient. Others complained about the quality of the food. The following are some of the views expressed by inmates about their meals:

'The food rations are too little'. - *Babs

'The food has no taste'. - *Angie

'One small blob of butter in the middle of a slice of bread is ridiculous'. - *Angie

'You have breakfast and lunch and for supper, if you save something at lunch then you are allowed to take this to your cell. Otherwise you go hungry, unless you gamble for maybe a slice of bread or you trade for something to eat'. - *Bianca

'I think they could do something about the food. If you have a full stomach, you have a happy prisoner. If we are sitting at a table, and you have finished eating and you still have some food left and the woman next to you is still hungry, you cannot give the food to her. It is got to go to the pigs. I am not allowed to give my food to a hungry prisoner, that is called smuggling'. - *Farah.

Prison officials stated that an expert dietician prepares all food menus with all the necessary food groups included. Food is prepared under strict supervision and the ration scale is uniform for all prisoners. According to Nesor (1989:213), 'complaints on insufficient or poorly prepared food can usually be effectively judged merely by noting the prisoner's physical appearance and his mass record'.

There are no pay-phones available at the prison, so the only way one can gain access to a phone is via the social worker. This practice is widely discouraged, not least because it proves inconvenient and disruptive for the social worker. As each inmate tells it though, the strength they find to cope with their troubles is largely due to the support that they receive from other inmates.

Coping Skills

Helping each other out, insofar as the sharing or trading of goods is concerned, helps to minimise the difficulty of 'doing time' for inmates.

Even though *Farah appears distrustful of people, she acknowledges the support of her 'friends' here in prison. But as *Angie, who is closest to *Farah explains: Farah just goes on and on about her problems. Sometimes I get so tired of listening to her. We all have our problems, but thinking about them all the time will just make you crazy'.

For *Angie, and most of the other inmates, avoiding thoughts of the outside world is the strategy that is used to cope with prison life. Learning to freeze her emotions and withdraw from any type of deep involvement with events on the outside, is a valuable and necessary aspect of survival for any imprisoned woman.

Finding ways to outmanoeuvre and outwit prison officials produces a strong sense of accomplishment for many of the women inmates. This is enforced by inmates maintaining their silence when confronted with knowledge of illegal goings-on among inmates. Inmates believed that playing 'deaf and dumb' when confronted by irregularities amongst fellow inmates was important. Not only did it guarantee one's safety in prison, it enforced prisoner rules against staff members. The prevailing consciousness among inmates was that of 'us' against 'them' – 'them' being the prison staff members.

At Westville Prison, the inmate who occupies the role of the 'pimp' is held in contempt and scorned by inmates. The 'pimp' is an inmate who informs on her fellow inmates in exchange for extended privileges. She proves a hindrance to the status quo of the inmate community by disrupting most illegal activities in which other inmates may participate. She further emphasises and widens the division between staff and inmates. At Westville, the code of honour among inmates is 'see nothing, hear nothing and do nothing'. Violation of this code by any inmate could lead to persecution by the rest of the inmate community. *Bianca explains: 'It is against prisoner rules to pimp. You have to cover for each other otherwise you will never survive. I will give you an example. We had a lady in here, she is gone home now. She used to pimp. Oh! All the time about the drugs, everything, to the members. Do you know they did to her? They got her in the diningroom, and she ended up covered with porridge and cuts ... here and here (Bianca pointing to her neck and face). They had to pull her into the kitchen to save her life. You do not pimp in prison'. The inmates at Westville Prison regarded 'ratting', 'snitching' or 'pimping' on another inmate to staff members as forbidden behaviour. While the inmate code of honour extended to all inmates, this was only when inmates were pitted against staff inquisition.

The social characterisation of inmates as 'snitches', 'pimps' or 'doing the Big Five' (informing on fellow inmates) leads to the issue of security for the women. The constant threat of violence or sexual abuse is not present for the Westville inmates. However, this aside, most of the women do experience some form of threat to their personal security. The women prisoners at Westville experience this sense of

insecurity by living in close proximity with other women who are believed to be selfish, cunning, untrustworthy and extremely devious. The following are some of the widely held beliefs of women:

'The women gossip all the time – you never know if they might be talking about you'. - *Farah

'Each one is only out to get what they can for themselves'. - *Bianca

'Never trust anybody here'. – Wendy

'I only have acquaintances, not friends. I will never tell anybody anything too personal'. - *Angie

The inmates believe that one has always to be aware of what one says in prison and to whom one says it. This is a golden rule by which all inmates have to live.

Further, many inmates admit to fighting a psychological battle within themselves to achieve some state of emotional security. *Bianca confides: 'You have to put on a brave, tough-cookie act, otherwise you will never survive here. Put on a happy face. You know, we were not allowed to have glass things or anything in the single cells ... glass cups or anything like that. My husband brought me a glass cup and they allowed it in because I did not have a cup. And I will never forget. It was about after the first week I had this terrible dream that I was actually committing suicide in my cell. I was locked up and I was committing suicide with my glass cup. And I took that cup and I gave it away because my mind was so mixed up at the time that I was scared that I would really do it. I cannot. I have got a husband and children to think about. If I survive this, I can survive anything'.

Rehabilitation

Some of the inmates reveal anxious thoughts about their impending release. Questions like 'Will I be able to make it on the outside?' and 'will I be accepted by my family/community again?' are questions the inmates ask themselves repeatedly.

Their concern is justified when one looks at the work they do in prison and the relation it bears to rehabilitation. A work assignment in prison is an inmate's duty. Work assignments are primarily geared towards institutional maintenance. No assignments are developed for inmates to assist them upon release into the community. Work-release programmes are non-existent. As *Flo argues: 'At the workshop, they teach you to sew and they give you a certificate. But the certificate

has the Westville Prison stamp on it. When I get out and show this certificate to get a job, who do you think is going to give me one?’

There was a noticeable relationship between the delegation of work assignments to inmates and the length of sentences of inmates. Workshop and laundry assignments were most likely to be meted out to inmates with longer prison sentences. The cleaning of sections was most likely to be the job of inmates with shorter sentences. *Wendy scornfully states: ‘Working in the workshop or laundry are the only worthwhile jobs here ... And these are given to inmates with longer sentences ...which I think is ridiculous! The inmates with shorter sentences are the ones who need to be taught some skills, even if it is in the workshop. They are the ones who are gonna be back on the streets soon, and need to learn not to make the same mistakes again’.

The Race Issue and Women Inmates

Class and race determine most social relations in South Africa. The position of women within racial structuring must not be ignored. Further, the history of Black women in South African society is characterised by both race and sex domination. At Westville Prison, Blacks comprised approximately 71% of the sample population, and, more than 88% of the institutional population. Whites and Asians accounted for the remaining 10% and 15% in the sample population and 17% and 20% in the institutional population respectively. Coloureds comprised 10% of the institutional population and 4% of the sample population.

It is obvious that here in prison, racial divisions are reflected. The differentiation among the women at Westville Prison is intense. Some of the women consider themselves socially superior to other inmates. Some of the White and Indian women find living among the Black women intolerable. Other inmates find the personal hygiene, mannerisms, or lack thereof, of some inmates difficult to live with.

*Sandy (Coloured) argues: ‘The Blacks talk too much and they talk too loud. Because of them, we all get punished and we do not get any cigarettes’. [Each inmate (irrespective of whether she smokes or not) is given a packet of cigarettes every week].

*Farah (Asian) speaks of her stay in a communal cell. ‘I was surrounded by Blacks in the cell. To have a shower, we all had to make queues and there was only hot water available. So some of the Blacks used to use the basin to wash themselves, and some used to even sit in the basin. That was too much to take. And worse they will be screaming and talking all the time. I used to have headaches. After six months I

requested for a single cell. I told the members I needed to have space to spread my musallah (prayer rug) and silence to say my namaaz (prayer)'.

*Marlene (31 years) and her mother *Gloria (55 years) are both serving prison sentences of three years and four years respectively, Marlene for fraud and her mother for theft. Marlene (White) says: 'Thank God, when I came here I did not have to stay in a communal cell with all those Blacks. I was given a single cell. And you know me, I tell these Blacks off, they must not mess with me. Gloria interrupts Marlene's ramblings [mother and daughter were interviewed together]. I worry about her. Sometimes she screams at them to shut up. She is going to get a knife in her one of these days'.

Of the Black inmates interviewed, many believe that some of the White and Asian inmates receive preferential treatment from certain prison staff members. *Nen (Black) states that she belongs to the 'Bible Prayer Group' (comprising Black inmates). 'The members always shout at us. They say that when we pray and sing we make too much of noise. But they do nothing to the group that is involved in smuggling. They like them. I do not know ... maybe the members are scared of this group, so they ignore all the bad things that goes on'.

Conclusion

The aim of this sociological study was to research how women prisoners adjusted to this closed environment inside a prison. The research was made easier by the repeal of the Prison Act, Section 44(1) (f)², but obtaining access to the prison was nevertheless something of a coup.

Essentially, this study was about letting the women speak for themselves. The task at hand was to take these experiences and evaluate whether the central role of prisons – to rehabilitate – was effective, or rather, to ask whether prisons reinforce criminality rather than empowering women to lead more meaningful lives?

There is punishment involved in women's imprisonment: the loss of freedom, deprivation of material goods, loss of security, sexuality, identity, and autonomy are suffocating, frustrating and restricting for women inmates at Westville Prison. As Kenneth Dimick (1987:57) points out, 'some imprisoned people live one

² Any person who publishes or causes to be published in any manner whatsoever any false information concerning the administration of any prison, knowing the same to be false, or without taking reasonable steps to verify such information (the onus of proving that reasonable steps were taken to verify information being upon the accused) – Statutes of the Republic of South Africa Prisons and Reformatories Correctional Services Act, (Act No 8 of 1959).

day at a time. They cannot afford to look back and are usually too afraid to look forward. Today is all that exists and the singular goal is to get through each 'today'.

As we have witnessed, the women of Westville Prison feel, dream, believe and think. They present their point of view clearly and they express their own perceptions and thoughts, thus providing a glimpse into prison life and the women who sit and wait. In common with most women, they have worries about their families and their children. Many of the women are frustrated by the helpless feeling they experience when trying to establish some contact with their children. Others find adapting to a regimented lifestyle difficult and unmanageable. Some of the women make concerted efforts to waylay depressive thoughts and feelings which they consider to be insidious and threatening.

At Westville Prison, rehabilitation and rehabilitative programmes suggest a general ignorance of the importance of programme planning for female offenders. The study established that isolated in a state of discontented domesticity, the women at Westville merely exist and serve out their time in despair and aimlessness. Punishment of offenders and rehabilitation are widely accepted reasons for the existence of prisons, yet very few people have faith in the current prison system to ever expect our prisons to achieve in these areas. To begin to address this situation, there is a need for comprehensive studies of the demographic characteristics of female offenders in correctional institutions throughout the country, and in community-based programmes. In addition, comparative studies are needed on male and female correctional institutions, as well as the attitude of male and female offenders. It is clear that room for improvement and change within the prison system exists. This can only be achieved by research, and by refusing to succumb to untested assumptions and stereotypes.

As revealed in this paper, the imprisonment of women is primarily punitive. The issues and challenges facing women's prisons today are complex, and multifaceted disciplinary approaches and programmes are required. There are no simplistic measures or techniques which will bring about immediate changes. However, prison-policy making should endeavour to incorporate views from experts in the various fields of psychiatry, sociology, law, gender studies, education, criminology, biology, nutrition, etc. and the prisoners themselves, who could all raise issues and propose solutions to problems encountered by the prisons.

As Dimick points out (1979:180): 'We are our society. If our society is not what we want it to be, we have the power to change. If prisons are as we want them to be, so be it. If not, we have the ability to change them. As long as we are willing to have prisons exist as they do, we will continue to imprison many victims of crime instead of criminals. If we want to change, then the responsibility is ours'.

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