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FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

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Researching trauma experiences with incarcerated women

WOMEN WITH CRIMINAL BACKGROUNDS, TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES, AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN-SPECIFIC SERVICES (RITA PROJECT)

Funder: Ministry of Social Affairs and Health of Finland

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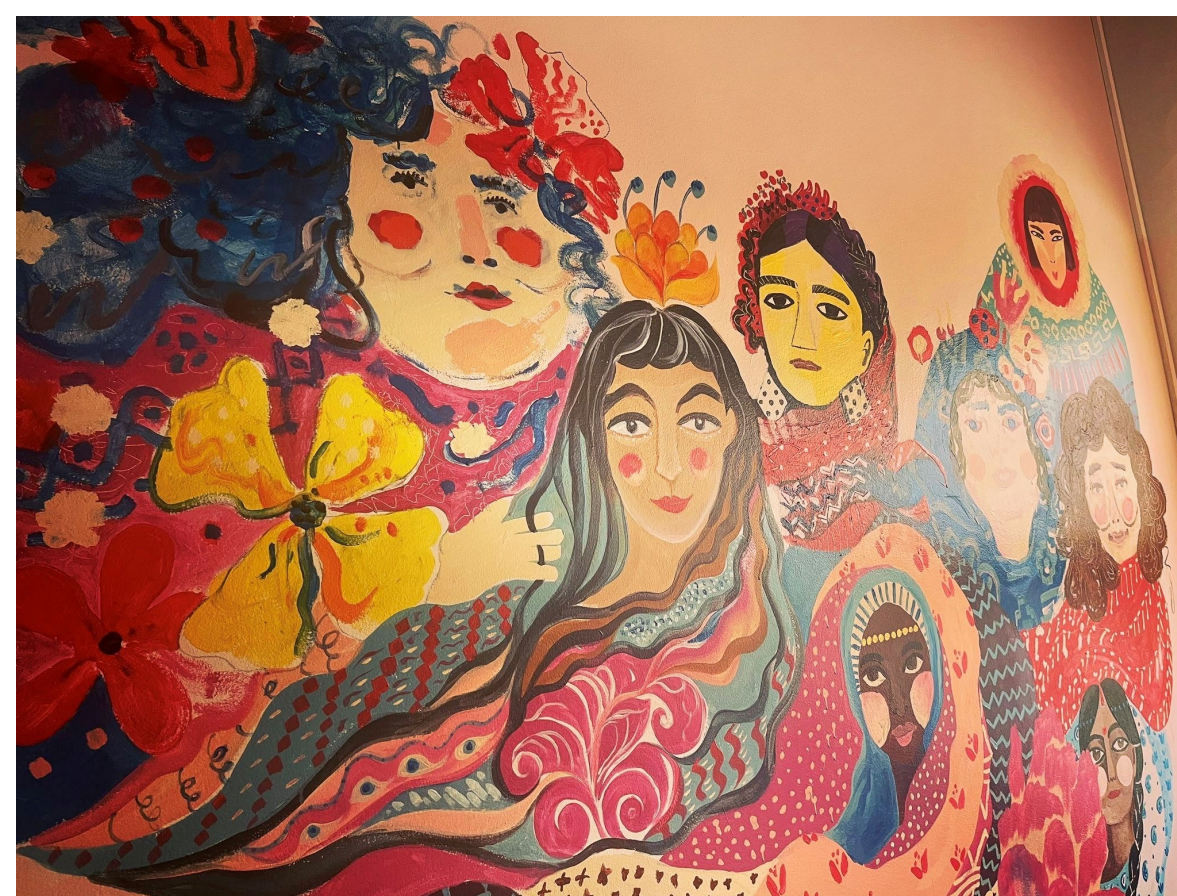
Our research focuses on women who are serving their criminal sentences in prison and have had traumatizing experiences throughout their life course. We are especially interested in the service needs of those women who have experienced traumatic events, with a focus on social services for them. Women with criminal backgrounds are a socially vulnerable group which means, for example, they are at risk of becoming a victim of violence or substance abuse with health and social impacts.

The research data comprises (1) survey data and (2) qualitative interviews conducted with female prisoners. The survey applies the Traumatic Antecedents Questionnaire (TAQ). In the interviews, we utilize the individual's questionnaire answers about their traumatic experiences and focus on their coping methods and the role of social and health services in these survival processes.

The collected data will be used in the development of women-specific and trauma-informed services for women with criminal backgrounds in two wellbeing service counties in Finland. It is particularly important that service providers support prisoners during the release process and contribute to their successful integration into society.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) What trauma experiences have female inmates had when they were underage and in adulthood?
- 2) How are trauma experiences linked to the use of services and what kind of support measures and services do women feel they need?
- 3) What kinds of female-specific services and service models are possible to develop that take account trauma experiences and are based on the current service system?



FEMALE PRISONERS AND PRISONS IN FINLAND

Approximately 8% of the more than 3,000 prisoners in Finland are female (234 women prisoners in 2022). Violent crimes are the main reason for incarceration among female prisoners.

In our study, we will collect data from two low-security prisons (Kestilä and Vanaja) and one high-security prison (Hämeenlinna).

Vanaja Prison features a family department for ten prisoners where parenting and life management are supported. The prison has also developed its work with female prisoners over the last ten years. Women-specific work is new in Finland, which is why women-specific work and research are needed.

Hämeenlinna Prison is a new smart prison in Finland. Each cell is equipped with a cell terminal (a laptop) on which inmates can use digital services for rehabilitation and education. In this study we use these cell terminals to collect data.



Vanaja Prison.

CHALLENGES OF TRAUMA RESEARCH

- Sensitivity of the research topic
 - Reluctance to discuss and reminisce
 - Confusing clinical interviews by medical professionals with research interview strategies and content based on previous experiences
- Challenges in recruiting a hard-to-reach population for research
 - One doesn't always recognize one has had traumatic experiences
 - Underestimating the importance of one's personal story
 - Issues of literacy and plain language
- Institutional context attitudes, resources and personnel's motivation to actively promote research participation
- Peer pressure and the complexity of social relations among female prisoners
- Issues of trust and confidentiality due to the distant position and role of the researchers
- The format of the survey form (online form/paper)

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS FROM THE STUDY (N = 18)

- The average length of the current incarceration period is 38 months (min 1 mo, max 154 mos).
- Over half of them are first-timers (56%).
- The education level of more than half of female prisoners is primary school (53%).



More information about the research group and the project.