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# 7 Incarcerated women, welfare services and the process of re-entering society in Finland

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## Abstract

The pathways in and out of crime differ according to gender, people's life histories, social situations and networks. Before being sentenced, many women have been living in vulnerable and traumatic life situations and violent relationships. Substance abuse often plays a crucial role in committing crimes. Being released from prison and re-entering society is a process that requires women's own motivation to desist along with help and support from society. This chapter shows how women narrate and describe their experiences after being released from prison and especially how they report the ways in which the welfare system responds to their needs. They discussed their needs for support and services, how they saw the logic of the service system and whether and how they managed to get the services they needed. Being released from prison leads women to a situation with complex and multiple needs, which is challenging the welfare system's ability to help them.

## Introduction

The pathways in and out of crime differ according to gender, people's life histories, social situations and networks. Before being sentenced, many women have been living in vulnerable and traumatic life situations and violent intimate relationships. Substance abuse often plays a crucial role in committing crimes. These circumstances are likely to have an influence in their entry into crime and substance abuse. There might have also been destructive relationships before the sentence. Being in a relationship often prevents men from committing crimes, but,

conversely, they can expose women to criminality. Many studies have shown that supportive relationships and social bonds have a significant influence on female desistance as well as on their assimilation and incorporation back into society (Lynch, Fritch and Heath 2012; Fleetwood 2014; Leverentz 2014; Kruttschitt and Kang 2019).

Women are also more likely to be carers to children. Their relationships with their children play a huge role while they are in prison and after their release. Children motivate their mother to refrain from crime and substance use. Children of incarcerated women are often taken into custody, while their mothers are left without any appropriate support for their feelings of sorrow and shame. In many studies, it has been shown how complex and diverse women's needs for support are (Devlin 1998; Chesney-Lind 2006; Estrada and Nilsson 2012; Virokannas 2017a, 2017b).

Being released from prison and re-entering society is a process that requires women's own motivation to desist along with help and support from society. Women with criminal backgrounds live in vulnerable situations, but I do not take women's vulnerable life situations for granted. The vulnerability is often the result of living in communities in which crime and substance abuse is pervasive and which have male-dominated social networks where violence is prevalent. After these women are released from prison, vulnerability emerges in their interactions with society (see Virokannas, Liuski and Kuronen 2020).

In this chapter, I focus on how women narrate and describe their experiences after being released from prison, especially how they report the ways in which the welfare system responds to their needs. Women discussed their needs for support and the provision of social services, how they viewed the logic of the system providing the services and whether and how they managed to get the services they needed. The data used in this chapter consist of narrative interviews with 31

Finnish women who were either in prison at the time of the interview or recently released from prison. The first set of 18 interviews was gathered in 2009–2010 for my dissertation (Salovaara 2019b). The second set consists of 13 interviews with women between 2017 and 2019.

## **Women and imprisonment**

Incarcerated women are a diverse group. However, women are typically imprisoned less frequently and for shorter periods than men are (Hypén 2004, 43; Gelsthorpe and Wright 2015). Women are also more motivated and willing to change their life situations after release. They take more responsibility for their actions and crimes and are more likely to recognise their impacts (Lempert 2016, 241–243).

In Finland, the number of female prisoners is much higher than that in other Nordic countries (Statistical Yearbook 2018 of the Criminal Sanctions Agency, 28; Kristoffersen 2019, 31–35). Moreover, a larger proportion of women are sentenced for violent crimes than in any other European country. In 2015, this accounted for 51% of all women sentenced. In 2018, the number had fallen to 44%. In Finland, the committing of violent crimes is equally common for women and for men and is also the most common reason for a prison sentence (KOS 2018; Statistical Yearbook 2018 of the Criminal Sanctions Agency, 33; Kristoffersen 2019). There is a strong correlation for a woman being a victim of intimate partner violence and for her committing violent acts. The linkage devices from the violent culture that induces individuals to be violent and is also a response to being a victim (Lattu 2016; Venäläinen 2017; Hautala et al. 2019; Salovaara 2019b).

Despite these figures, the proportion of women sentenced to prison terms remains scarce. Their deviation from the male standard creates an illusion whereby women may be treated as

challenging and exceptional cases in terms of imprisonment. Imprisoned women remain on the margins of prison culture. After arriving in prison, women become 'invisible' along with their specific needs (Devlin 1998, vii). That may lead to a lack of women-specific services and suitable rehabilitation (Chesney-Lind 2006; Lynch, Fritch and Heath 2012; Salovaara 2019a). After release, they remain in the same position, as the narratives of the interviewed women show.

### **Women's needs after release**

The circumstances that led to the imprisonment of women were challenging and being released does not make these problems disappear. On the contrary, changing these circumstances is a long and demanding process. Before incarceration, women might have been living in subcultures favourable to substance abuse and crime as well as in harmful and violent intimate relationships. There is always a risk they would return to the same situation. While in prison, there was the opportunity to make plans and dream about how to change their lives. Incarceration was experienced as a halt and a pause: a time to concentrate, think and learn about themselves. After release, it was necessary for the women to change their former lifestyles and social networks, especially when their plan was to re-integrate back into society. The most relevant issue is women's own willingness to change and their motivation to do so. However, in order to make this change, there is also a need for support and open-mindedness from the local welfare service system and authorities as well as from fellow citizens. The combination of women's own motivation together with social support and adequate services was necessary for the successful integration and re-entry. Women talked about the needs they had for welfare services in the area of housing and rehabilitation (Salovaara 2019b). One of the basic steps to this integration is having an apartment of one's own:

...But the thing that everything is all right, when you get out of here. Like that you have a home. A home is crucial, because then you have your own place where you can just be. So that if you don't have your own place, then you have nothing of your own. But if you have that place where you can be, it carries you far, like really far. I noticed that last time.

(Sanna)

Sanna explains the meaning of an apartment as home, which is more than just walls and a roof over one's head; it also means privacy, safety and one's own space. Moreover, it also symbolises belonging and acceptance, being part of society. Housing and permanent residency are essential when trying to end a criminal life and substance use. Without a proper and stable home, the ability and motivation to change one's severely restricted lifestyle. In Finland, one-third of all the prisoners released in 2018 were released without an apartment (Ara 2019). Being released from prison without a place to live means living with friends, relatives or in a shelter or other institutions. In Finland, the homeless do not commonly live on the streets, and therefore homelessness is more invisible than it is in other countries (Ara 2019). In the following excerpt, Emmi talks about her long-term homelessness:

Well, I had an apartment of my own for five years, like my own flat. So, it wasn't a boyfriend's or anybody else's. Like five years of my life. Otherwise, I have always been homeless, but then I have been living with my boyfriends... I was mentally in a bad shape, so I did a runaway from my own home. Sounds weird to say, 'from my own home'. When he last boyfriend went somewhere, he told me that 'there is someone watching over you here'. And there was nobody in the flat. I was so messed up... Then one day I left there and went to my mother's place. And so, I did get rid of that bloke. I had a psychosis and went into a mental hospital for three months. I trusted no one, and I didn't let the doctors examine me. I

was in bad shape 'cause I had been using stuff for so long. Then we got some distance between us. Before that we were together all the time.

(Emmi)

Emmi discussed being without her own apartment for ten years, living with boyfriends in abusive relationships, and finally, how she had managed to leave the last and most traumatic of these relationships. The situation of not having any apartment or a safe place to live is one of the major causes of women-specific vulnerability. The homeless women are relatively more invisible than homeless men are. Women are more likely to live with their ex-partners or in harmful relationships than in shelters. Homelessness exposes women to being dependent on people, mostly men, who have an apartment. Being homeless also exposes them to harmful situations, violence and abusive relationships (see also Chapter 10, Lavee in this book). The necessity of having an apartment or some place to live leads to dependence on those who are able to provide such a place. That may lead to women becoming dependent on a man for the housing, drugs, money and shelter they can provide. Living on one's own enables non-violent and non-abusive living conditions (e.g. Sallmann 2010; Lewison, Thomas and White 2014; Granfelt 2016). There is also a high demand for women-specific services as well as a clear need to understand the traumatic and abusive life course. But having an apartment is not always enough, there is still a need for support.

And if you have got to arrange things with specific dates and time limits, there is always a fear of how it will end. How am I supposed to arrange everything then? Then you'll make some 'quick-fix' and you are in a panic. And when you are in a panic, you don't think reasonably. You can't think straight, and you waste a lot of energy. They are saying 'first things first'. But how in the hell are you supposed to know which is the first when you have

dozens of those things to do? You are not able to say which is the most important, because all of them seem to be that. It leads to a situation when you just can't explain and arrange your own issues. You don't know what you think about those. And when you don't know, you just can't even phone someone. Hell, I don't know how to stay sober and without drugs and cope with my life. These are the most important issues, and I don't know how to solve them. But I know that you can't do it by yourself.

(Helena)

Helena is describing her needs in everyday living. It seems as if she is trying to control her life and manage with chaotic issues in a problematic phase in her life. Helena talked about 'issues with specific dates and time limits'. These issues referred to the different official forms and applications and also to dealing with the authorities and the whole welfare system. These issues seem to be hard to handle, and there is an obvious need for counselling, which includes support with housing, coping with the authorities and society in general. To Helena and several other women, living without substance use is not something that can be taken for granted. In particular, when problems come along, substances might be the old and familiar way of solving problems. After a year of being sober, Helena still has to consider how to stay without the use of substances in situations where she really requires counselling on many issues, and her own ability to manage on the whole is poor. Old habits are easy to fall back on when there are financial hardships, and the possibilities of a 'quick-fix' include selling drugs to solve financial problems. In the manner which Helena described this 'quick-fix', one can see that she is worried about her own situation. Women explained that they had problems and challenges in taking care of and filling in different forms and applications, which may be the result of long-term marginalisation. Furthermore, society's digitalisation may cause digital marginalisation (Eubanks 2011). As running errands



and providing services increasingly moves online, the lack of digital skills are denying the unskilled from the services they are entitled to. Helena and several other women told about the need for ‘interpreters’ because they required someone to explain to the authorities what they really meant and needed. There is also a need for an ‘interpreter’ to explain to the authorities the life situations and challenges women have. In Finland, there are some non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that provide interpreters who work with ex-prisoners and know their everyday lives.

### **Women’s challenges in receiving services in the welfare system**

Being released from prison and having a background with substance abuse, violence, criminality and even homelessness leads women to a situation that challenges the welfare system’s ability to help them. As a result, they are seen as a service user with demanding needs. The welfare service system could not always respond to the needs of released women. In some cases, the structure of the service system seems to be system-oriented instead of service-user-oriented, and there might be diversion or expulsion (Määttä 2012; Metteri 2012). Anu describes her experiences:

My prison counsellor phoned to Kela<sup>1</sup> and there was this very lovely person. She said that I have plenty of opportunities although I am on a disability pension. If you first go and see a doctor, you could go to the work try-out. You can also study when you are on a pension. So, when the probationary freedom ends, I go to the doctor. And then I got myself an appointment at Kela. There the clerk said that I couldn’t go to a work try-out. He was a young bloke. Then I said that we just called you guys with my counsellor from prison. The bloke replied that no one could have said anything like that because there is no record here that you had called. I said that my counsellor made the call. He again replied: ‘It is not

possible because there isn't any record of any phone calls'. Then I asked him: 'Are you saying that she didn't make the call?' 'Yes', he replied, 'because there is no record of the phone call'. He decided that I couldn't do any work.

(Anu)

The service system seems to be so complex that even those working in it could not help service users and even they did not have enough knowledge of the services as a whole. Anu described her experiences with the National Insurance Institution Kela and the conflicting advice offered about its services. Preparation for her release was done in prison. The preparation included getting familiar with the service system and the different kinds of offices. Both Anu, other women and the professionals working with them reported that opportunities for face-to-face contacts with authorities were scarce and weak. Many services are available online and require filling in an application form or participating in a written online chat. There is an urgent need for contacting and starting the cooperation between prisoners and the authorities already during the incarceration period. But unfortunately the authorities both outside and inside prison find it hard to contact each other. From the perspective of the prisoner being released, the role of the social worker and other authorities is rather limited. In addition, authorities seemed to be acting as gatekeepers who have the right to provide or deny the service (Lipsky 1980; Kallio and Saarinen 2013; Blomberg, Kallio and Kroll 2016). Women's experiences of being marginalised with regard to services increase their feelings as outsiders in the society. In the following extract, Maria described failing to get a pre-arranged treatment:

Sometimes you won't get any service even though you ask for it. I was having a terrible psychosis, like I hadn't taken any drugs for many days. My sister didn't know what else to do, so she and my mother had decided to take me for treatment. I was there for a few days.

Then they called from the hospital to the clinic. They put me in a taxi in the morning and told me 'go to the addiction clinic where there is a place for you. Take a voucher with you to pay for the ride'. Well, I did go to the clinic and then I was knocking at the door saying 'there should be a place for me in there'. Then there comes a guy to the door and says 'what, there's no place here for you'. I was like 'what the fuck'. You know, I was still in psychosis then. I was like 'where should I go? I don't have any flat, I don't have anything'. The answer was like, 'it's not our business'. And they had called from the hospital that I was coming! And they gave me a voucher for the taxi! I still don't get that... After that I walked to social services and told them the situation. They told me to go to the shelter for homeless people.

(Maria)

Maria failed to receive the services that had been arranged for her. The experience of being left on the streets in the middle of a psychosis and withdrawal symptoms had a considerable effect on Maria's trust and self-esteem. After experiences of the authorities' neglect, Maria and other women thought that it was much easier not to ask anyone more favours. In this narrative, it is significant that Maria felt that nobody had taken responsibility for her case after all. These kinds of narratives of rejection share features of randomness and feelings of 'almost getting the service'.

I remember one time, when I went to the social office and I felt kind of shitty. I had thought that I wouldn't take another hit of amphetamine, so that I could sort my things. The social worker was there, turning up her nose for real! I went to my car; our drugs were there. I took a huge hit and went back inside to shout and rage. Like I did that on purpose, like if you really want to...if you treat me like a junkie, then you'll get the fucking junkie. I get this,

like, stupid rage. It feels bad, especially if you go there sober. Then the other one looks at you like you had syphilis or some other contagious disease.

(Maria)

Maria told about her feelings of frustration and rage after her meeting with a social worker did not go as she had planned. In her narrative, Maria was not very pleased with her own 'stupid rage'. When having contact with authorities, Maria and other women had many expectations of getting help and counselling from them. For that reason, these contacts were also fulfilled with many emotions. Women described their dealings with authorities as being demanding and sometimes even shocking. They described situations where the authorities did not understand their problems and their circumstances. Women also pointed out that they felt that authorities were ignoring their needs or providing insufficient services.

### **Strategies to obtain suitable services**

The welfare system in Finland is based on legislation and universal rights based on nationality or residence, but municipalities can decide how services are provided. For this reason, the services which are provided for people with multiple problems can sometimes be fragmentary. That may lead to insufficient or even wrong services for service users. Because of these gaps in the encounters that users have with services, there is also an under-use of certain services. A lack of proper encounters also influences cooperation between different authorities. In the next excerpt, Anu shares her feelings of being a former prisoner and now a service user:

Because you have been in prison for years where you could never argue against anything in there or to have your own opinion, so you accept everything as it is because you think that it is the correct way, and you think that is the way it goes, and this is what I have to deal with.

(Anu)

Like Anu, other women talked about how they feel the need to have a humble attitude when getting services. They also talked about having to tolerate inappropriate or even humiliating behaviour. Daring to contact authorities and asking for help or advice could be challenging and stressful for women released from prison. In addition, the governing and operative codes of behaviour might be different or even strange. There was also confusion about correct procedures. After being released, the feelings of shame and guilt could be so strong that they became a barrier against asking for any services (Virokannas 2019). Laura was in a desperate situation in her search for an apartment. In this excerpt, she describes her experiences with the authorities:

That was a surprise, when we came here to the city because we weren't in the books here and we had come from prison [laughter]. And I as a woman couldn't imagine that they would look at me in that way. I said, 'I came from prison and I've been there for that long and now I have to live somewhere'. 'You can't get a home here just like that! You have to be a resident in the city first'. It was difficult in the end to get an apartment from here. We had to get an apartment from a private renter because both of our credit ratings had gone. Both my husband and I had to go back to the group of drunks and use some stuff because, of course, it seemed that life won't go on from there. Then we heard from those drunks that there is this guy named Heikki. From him we got the apartment in a suburb. If we hadn't heard that there is this guy, I don't know where we would have gone from there. Probably back to the prison.

(Laura)

Laura shared how she and her husband did not get help until they were back on the streets after being released. She said they wanted a fresh start in their new city of official residence. In Finland, people have the right to get services from the municipality where they have their official residence. After release, several women talked about their interest in moving somewhere besides their old city of official residence, as Laura above did. They had the idea of starting over without the shame and stigma of being former prison inmates. Moving to another locality also contributes to building social relations. When returning to one's former city of residence, there are old substance-use-oriented friends, and the opportunities to desist are scarce. Women's motivations and reasons to move to another town are not visible or understandable to the authorities. Laura and her husband found their apartment by using unofficial help and peer support (Chapter 12, Virokannas in this book). Next, Elina describes her way out of addiction.

I decided I wouldn't use any drugs there [in prison]. Then I held on to that. Yes, there were all kind of drugs even in a closed prison. I would have had many opportunities to use them. Then I had the possibility of going to the drug-free section. I thought that I would try. There was an interview and after that, they told me I could come. Then they asked me to apply to the open prison's rehabilitation course and I got the place! There were many applicants and I was one who got in. So, I had to be happy. There I completed the course and the rest of my sentence. There was a counsellor for substance abusers, and she suggested I apply to rehabilitation for the rest my sentence. And I got in. Then I got three months extra time for rehabilitation. That time gave me tools and encouraged me to try a different way of living. And the possibility to stay in this town. And then there was also a housing subsidy for a year after rehabilitation. During the rehabilitation I thought I could check this all the way. If being sober didn't suit me, I could always go back to the old way.

(Elina)

The ability to get a place from the open prison means that the inmate met the requirements for managing her substance use. The prison system therefore endorses and supports those who have better equipped to follow the rules. This system categorises prisoners according to their addiction and their ability to handle it. In closed prisons, the services are inadequate and to get decent service requires demanding it. What is common and remarkable in women's narratives both in prison and after release is the lack of social work services. The services are arranged in prisons, and after release, the services are provided by the NGOs.

Being released from prison could be a step forward and an opportunity to change one's life course. Sometimes, this transition also means the need to change one's whole social network: both friends and one's city of residence. Re-entry into society is a long and demanding process. The path from addict to non-addict, from criminality to the ability to get by on little money depends on having suitable professionals around. It was startling to hear women say that they had 'good luck' when they have encountered an understanding official and received appropriate services. The women's narratives all had in common the way they described their path to re-entry: successful re-entry requires suitable services, good encounters and experiences with the professionals and the service system and sufficient self-motivation to move towards integration.

## **Conclusion**

Being released from prison exposes women to those vulnerable life situations they had experienced before their sentencing. They are living in vulnerable life situations because they exist at the margins of the welfare system. Being at the margins means that the welfare service system lacks the ability to offer them women-specific services and support, but also the services

are fragile, and there is an absence of empowering social work. As a result, the women wander around the margins lacking decent services. They are denied access to the services or are viewed as not suitable to receive them. Without adequate provision of timely, women-specific services, their needs will not be met. In addition, these women also require women-specific understanding of the traumas they face and the trauma-based behaviour they exhibit, which has been caused by living in a drug- and crime-related culture and by experiencing abusive relationships (Chapter 9, Karttunen in this book).

The needs the women described were basic ones: having an apartment and getting help in keeping it. However, these are the very things that are essential for successful re-entry into society. The means and strategies to obtain services and meet their needs included having a humble attitude. Moreover, there seems to be a lack or at least a low profile of social work in the narratives of these women. It seems that the current provision of social work with adults is not able to answer the needs of women after they are released from prison. In the Finnish welfare service system, the role of social work is to act as an advocate for clients' rights. This feature seems lacking in the women's narratives about social work. The service providers are not able to understand the needs of these women on being released from prison nor do they comprehend what it means to be a woman with a criminal background. Inappropriate services lead to the invisibility of social work in their lives. When services are not able to meet people's needs, the welfare system looks fragile.

The services and support planned for and provided to released women should include a women-specific orientation. Here, 'women-specific' means an understanding of vulnerable life situations and the consequences these may have. It means understanding violence, traumas and substance abuse. The services women require seem to be available through peer support and from NGOs.



However, the funding of such organisations in Finland is based on project funding and is therefore short, fragile and uncertain. Moreover, they operate regionally and so cannot provide services across the nation.

The logic of the welfare system and its services seems to be vague, hit-and-miss and incoherent. In their narratives, the women attempted to describe their understanding of it as well as their abilities to adapt to it and operate within it. The women knew their rights as citizens of the welfare state, but they did not know which services were available or how to obtain them. On the other hand, they were aware of their reputation as former prisoners. However, they required more face-to-face contacts and interactive services. Instead, the procedures of the authorities and the service system were unfamiliar and incoherent for them. They said that getting services depended on good luck. As a whole, the welfare system in Finland seems to offer sufficient services. When the service user needs multiple and concurrent services, however, the provision of an appropriate combination of these can be challenging.

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<sup>1</sup>National Social Insurance Institution. See Chapter 8, Krok, and Chapter 3, Virokannas, Salovaara, Krok and Kuronen in this book.