

# **The Invisible Sentence Project**

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The Invisible Sentence project is a two year project being conducted at the Central West Women's Health Centre. This Project aims to identify and document the issues that impact on women who have a partner or family member in prison.

Following is a discussion of the major themes which emerged from interviews and discussions with women who have a partner or family member imprisoned.

## **Profile of Participants (Interviewees):**

17 women participated in semi structured, in-depth interviews. 16 of these participants had a partner or family member who had experienced being an inmate at a Corrective Centre in the Central West (Bathurst, Lithgow or Kirkconnell) and one participant had a partner who was an inmate at Muswellbrook Correctional Centre.

***Relationship to the inmate:*** The majority of the participants were partners of the inmate but included mothers and a sister.

***Age:*** The women ranged in age from: 20 – 54 years old.

***Ethnicity:*** 11 of the participants described themselves as Anglo White Australians. Four of the participants were aboriginal identified. One participant identified herself as being from a different cultural background and the remaining participant was born overseas. All of the participants spoke English as their first language.

***Children:*** Typically, women had caring responsibilities for young children. 15 of the participants had children. 11 of the participants had one or more children under the age of 12 for whom they were the primary carer (10 mothers and one grandmother.) 3 of the participants had teenage children. The remaining 1 woman with children described them as ‘grown up.’ The most common number of children was: 3 or 4. 8 participants had between 3 to five children.

***Employment Status:*** Only 2 of the participants were working. All of the women with children under the age of 12 described themselves as fulltime carers. One of these women had teenage children and the other had older children including teenagers and grown up children.

***Place of Residence:*** 11 of the participants were currently living in Bathurst or in the process of moving to Bathurst. Of these, 9 participants came (or were coming) to Bathurst because of having a partner or family member in prison. The places participants moved from in order to be closer to the inmate included: Kandos, Coonamble, Dubbo, Grafton, Cowra and Wyong. 5 of these women were looking for accommodation in Bathurst and were currently staying with family or friends. The remaining participants were currently living in: Lithgow, Kandos, Sydney and the Hunter Valley.

***Women’s Past experience with a Correctional Centre:*** 9 of the women had a previous experience with a correctional centre, either because of the current inmate’s previous experience or because of a previous partner or another family member who served time in prison. For the remaining participants (8) this was their first experience with having a partner or family member incarcerated.

***Type of offence:*** 4 participants declined to comment when asked about what their partner’s were in prison for. For the remaining thirteen participants, the types of crimes

committed ranged from more serious criminal activity and included murder and armed robbery but ranged through to driving offences. Common offences included; assaults, theft, drug related offences of driving and assaults, driving with a cancelled license. The longest sentence being served was 10 years and the shortest was 12 months. The majority of the sentences being served were less than 2 years.

***Stage of the Sentence:*** At the time of the interviews the participants were at varying stages of their partner/family member's sentence. 3 participants had partners who had completed their sentence while 3 participants had partner's who had still not been sentenced at the time of the interview. The majority of the participants had partner's/family members who had been in prison at least 6 months and still had time to serve.

***How participants were contacted:*** The women who participated in the interviews were contacted through the following organisations: Family Support (Bathurst and Lithgow), Bathurst Children of Prisoner's Support Group (COPSG), Kelso Schools as community centres, CRC Justice and Bathurst Women's Housing.

### **Focus Group Participants:**

Five aboriginal identified women participated in a focus group which discussed the issues impacting on women with a partner/family member in prison. The focus group was asked to respond to some questions which broadly considered the areas addressed in the interviews.

The women were all currently living in an isolated rural community in the Western Central West. All of the women had a previous experience with having a partner or family member imprisoned, their relationships to the inmates were: 2 mothers, 2 partners and one sister. 2 of the women previously worked but were now retired. The other 3 participants were currently full time carers at home. The group ranged in age from women in their 20s who had fairly young children to women who were grandmothers and retired.

***Psychological trauma:***

20 of the 22 participants said they experienced the inmate's sentence as difficult and stressful; while the felt suffering varied, most women reported psychological trauma and related this experience to specific stressors associated with the imprisonment of a partner or family member.

The contributing factors women discussed as arising from the sentence of a partner or family member and which impacted on their wellbeing included: grief and loss, loneliness and isolation, stigma, worry about the inmate, anger about perceived injustice and a sense of helplessness, increased responsibility, distress in trying to deal with the children's issues, frustration and difficulty in dealing with the gaol system, practical difficulties with accessing affordable transport or accommodation and financial hardship.

While there was commonality among the participants in terms of the factors identified, the weight given to each of the factors in influencing their sense of wellbeing varied for each participant. This may in part reflect the diversity among the participants, for example while some women grew up with poverty an aspect of their life, other women experienced poverty for the first time when their partner or family member went to prison.

***DASS scores:***

The women's scoring of the Depression and Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS) supported their expressed experience. 13 participants agreed to complete the DASS. Only one of these women scored within the normal range for each category. 3 participants had scores indicating at least one of the categories to be in the mild to moderate range of severity. The remaining 9 women had scores for at least two of the categories as falling within the severe to extremely severe range. In 2 of the cases high stress and anxiety levels co existed with each category either falling into the severe or extremely severe range. 4 of the women had high levels of stress, anxiety and depression with scores on all 3 categories falling within the severe or extremely severe range. For 2 participants severe to extremely severe scores were registered for depression and anxiety and the remaining participant scored within the severe range for depression and stress.

***Other Studies also suggest this group have their mental and physical wellbeing impacted on:***

Women experiencing separation from a partner/family member because of prison are typically in a situation of crisis and need an opportunity to mourn in order to prevent later mental health problems (Fox, 1981). It is, however, likely that currently women do not have the opportunity to deal with this trauma in a constructive way because research demonstrates this group of women experience high levels of anxiety and depression (Codd, 2000; Fishman, 1991 & Lowenstein, 1986)

Other studies have also highlighted the physical impact associated with this trauma, for example a study by Ferraro, Johnson, Jorgenson & Bolton (1983) found 1/3 of the women in their study with a partner imprisoned experienced recent health problems (physical or mental). These problems actually doubled from the time of arrest to 18 months confinement, suggesting that compounding emotional and psychological stress may result in deteriorating health. Davis (1991) also reported that all the women in her study who had partners imprisoned had health problems related to their physical and mental well-being.

***Initial period of incarceration very difficult:***

There was strong perception by many of the participants that the initial period of the sentence was the most difficult. Participants volunteered the particular stress of this time, and highlighted the need for support during this period. Some of these participants referred to particular difficulty sleeping at night time, including participants who volunteered they were medicated with sleeping pills and/or anti depressants. Similarly, women sometimes experienced changes in eating patterns, particularly difficulty in eating. One participant said that her difficulty eating at this time culminated in an eating disorder. In reflecting on this comparatively stressful time, many women spoke about their current difficulty but compared it to an earlier, more traumatic time at the beginning of the sentence.

*When he first went in I was running myself down, not eating, spewing because of stress, I've got better now...I was pale and sick before.*

*What I did first off was lose 2 stone in the first week and could not do anything but throw up and had diarrhoea for the first month, I was a total wreck, total wreck.*

*From the time he went to gaol the worst for the first few weeks for me was waking up in the morning and like it comes into your mind that he's not there and you've sort of got to deal with it you know what I mean? It sort of gets you down a bit. Like waking up and remembering.*

Even though this initial period was a particularly intense time for women when disturbances in eating and sleeping patterns were experienced, for some of the women these disturbances continued after the initial adjustment period. The degree of perceived suffering did vary for many women according to the stage of the sentence. However almost all of the women continued to be affected by stressors throughout their 'Invisible Sentence.'

One participant whose husband had been in gaol for about a year at the time of the interviews spoke about her ongoing difficulty when I asked her how she was now coping:

*Some nights I drink too much because I'm down, it's the worst thing you can do but I can't help it. Not drinking through the days but at night the loneliness is the worst thing and no I don't sleep more than a few hours at a time, I wake up and I'm crying or I realise I'm living a nightmare. Eating, sometimes I'm hungry sometimes I'm not, I'm on the thin side anyway so any stress, I don't eat, I've always been the same so bit of a problem there trying to keep the weight on.*

And another participant said:

*I still have little crying sessions and when he (baby) gets upset and calls out for 'dad dad' all the time that hurts me.'*

***Separation Trauma (Shock and Grief and Loneliness and Isolation):***

Many women talked about the distressing emotions caused by the separation from a partner or family member; shock and grief were part of this experience. Typically, shock and grief were most acute in the initial sentence period when women reported the disturbances they experienced with sleeping and eating patterns. The distress for some women included the shock of the initial news of criminal activity and the traumatic processes associated with this:

*It's such a terrible thing that happened. It was such a terrible shock for me to have the police arrive here and tell me what had happened. They took him away and I didn't see him for 4 days, I didn't know what was happening and I wasn't told anything. So I completely fell apart as you can imagine.*

The pain associated with the grief of separation was described by one woman as similar to the loss felt when someone dies:

*When he first went to gaol it was like he died. Um I really I mean I had the chest pain like the pain you feel when someone's dead, really. I mean I went through images of him, my little boy with blue eyes, blond hair being in gaol, all that grief, it's a loss, I really felt, I felt it keenly.*

Another woman spoke about her distress of losing her long term partner to gaol:

*It's not very good at all, I'm always in tears. I took pretty bad at the hospital yesterday, I can't handle the stress. When you're with someone for 27 years and all of a sudden they aren't there...and you're homeless and trying to find somewhere and you've got kids here, there and everywhere, it's pretty hard you know...*

One woman talked about how hard it was for her to have to leave her son at the end of a visit:

*...it breaks my heart to walk away and leave him there when I go.*

An aspect of the loss for some women was their perception that their partner or family member was dehumanised by being in gaol and being subject to degrading procedures such as strip searches. One mother with a son in prison expressed her grief in seeing her son dressed in a 'monkey suit' at visiting time. Another participant spoke about the grief she felt for her partner being imprisoned:

*It rips me apart to have him in gaol locked up like an animal*

Other studies have also found that most women experience the separation from husbands as a painful loss, needing assistance to handle the grief and cope with the loneliness and

loss of companionship (Carlson & Cervera, 1991; Fishman, 1988b; Fishman, 1991). One of the strongest perceived effects of imprisonment is emotional, with problems coming to terms with or coping with feelings (Ferraro, Johnson, Jorgenson & Bolton, 1983). Common initial feelings in response to incarceration include: anger, rage and hostility, fear and loneliness. Parents typically have difficulty in dealing with their emotional reactions which include: guilt, shame, rage and fear (Ferraro et al., 1983).

For partners, loneliness could be compounded by sexual frustration. Women often feel their lives are on hold during their husband's absence, since they needed their husband present to resume their meaningful role of wife (Fishman, 1988b).

***Stigma:***

While some participants noted that the imprisonment had made little change to other relationships, many participants spoke about significant changes which occurred in relationships because of the inmate's sentence. The women who reported being particularly effected by stigma were those participants who lived in areas which could be described as more middle class than most of the participants. As noted by one participant who felt she was not affected by stigma, the type of crime committed probably plays a role in the extent of experiencing stigma:

*A lot of my circle of friends and neighbours and things have got someone in gaol or a lot of them don't seem to worry much, it'd probably be different if I had to tell them he was doing something like a rape or molesting a child or something, it was only driving without a licence.*

Nonetheless, other women who had friends and/or relatives who reacted to the imprisonment in a negative way, found the impact of stigma compounded their distress. Sometimes women were also reluctant to reach out for support because they had to deal with their own feelings of shame. This was clearly a time when women needed support from family and friends; when they were unable to get this support either because of their own sense of shame and/or the reactions of others, their suffering was intensified:

*When this first happened all of our friends decided to take the opposite view to what we all thought and they wiped me, they didn't phone me, you know like we were completely cut off from everybody... I feel dreadfully abandoned, that's what gets me the worst. That is the worst part about it.*

This woman also spoke about the difficulty in explaining the absence of her husband:

*I mean I don't know what to say if they say to you 'what does your husband do? You don't know how to answer it...people say 'how's your husband? And I say 'Oh he's O.k.' and then I've had people say 'mmm, I never see your husband anymore, his car is never in the carport, hasn't been there for months, have you separated? Stuff like that.*

Another woman spoke about her reluctance to confide in her friends about her situation:

*I haven't told some of my friends, some of my friends would not cope with that at all. No one here knows, we have not told anyone because my son had moved out of home. So as far as they know he's in Sydney working.... I don't want everyone to know.*

Aboriginal women living in an isolated rural community spoke about community pressure. In their situation the community had knowledge of the women's association with an inmate; the 'closeness' of this community meant that women felt judged because of opinions expressed by others. They reported that the reaction of the community tended to be either 'why do you bother?' or else 'it's your fault.'

Other findings also discuss the exacerbation of loss for families who have to cope with stigma because of having an intimate association with a criminal (Bakker, Morris & Janus, 1978), and that coming to terms with this stigma can mean a loss of self esteem (Carlson & Cervera, 1991). Being stigmatised can be partly a result of expectations about the female role of controlling behaviour of men; some women experience being blamed for their partner's behaviour and for mothers with children serving a sentence there can be a sense of failure as a parent (Dallao, 1997). It seems that stigma is not experienced in a consistent or predictable way by those associated with inmates. For example women who are partners of new offenders tend to experience more stigma than women who have a partner who has a history of offences (Fishman, 1988). For women who perceive themselves as lower class there is less shame experienced since a partner's arrest is viewed as an aspect of lower class life (Fishman, 1988). When wives do report feelings of shame it is often as a result of the type of offense committed; for example families may suffer more when white collar or moral crimes are committed (Lowenstein, 1986).

### ***Worry about the safety and wellbeing of the inmate.***

Participants had as one of their major worries the safety and wellbeing of the inmate. This included worry about an extreme outcome from being in gaol such as being stabbed but also worry about the long term psychological impact of gaol on their partner or family member. The women I spoke to were very aware of the violent culture of prisons and worried about the physical safety of the men:

*People get killed in gaol, and there are suicides.*

*I was so worried about him you never know there could be a phone call one day to say that something happened. That's what I'm dreading, it's always at the back of my mind, and that's what I mean, the courts send them to gaol, they should send them to places where they get help.*

*Always worrying about him being in gaol, fights, stabbings. Night time was pretty bad, especially if he got unsettled about something and I got a phone call during the week. There's nothing you can do, cause you can't visit til the weekend.*

Sometimes the fears women had became reality for example:

*We visited him while he was in hospital and I wasn't expecting to see what I saw, he was a very big mess. I should not have taken my children to the hospital to see him cause they were very frightened.*

***Powerlessness:***

A couple of women tried to protect the inmate by reporting incidences of being 'stood over' only to find that this backfired and made the situation worse. There was therefore a feeling of being worried yet powerless in the face of the violence inherent in prisons.

Women's fears included the impact of gaol and how counterproductive they felt it could be in terms of damaging the person on the inside. There was frustration about the inappropriateness of prison for men who had various problems which women felt were not addressed, and in fact were often made worse by the experience of gaol. Some women spoke about the issues that the inmate had with alcohol and drugs and one woman spoke about her husband's psychiatric disorder. These women felt that gaol was the worst place for men struggling to overcome personal problems in their lives. They spoke about the need for alternative help such as rehabilitation.

*My son's in for 2 years, he's a young man, he knows more about crime since he's been in there than what he knew before he went in there. I mean he was in there because of drug related problems mainly. They turn you into criminals, that's for sure.*

Powerlessness for these women seemed to underlie much of their frustration. They were powerless in the face of what they perceived as a counterproductive justice system but they were also powerless to help protect their husband or family member. For many of the women there was a sense of anger and injustice about this powerlessness. Even when the situations were less extreme women still keenly felt their powerlessness in the face of a system which they experienced as unfathomable and often arbitrary in the decisions made:

*We didn't expect him to go to gaol he was meant to get weekend detention if anything.*

*It's a harsh system. His court case was adjourned 7 times. The solicitor asked for an updated report which was refused and he was sentenced on the day, it was a big shock when he was sentenced to gaol.*

Aungles (1994) and Ferraro et. al. (1983) also found women were fearful for the safety of partners or family members and that emotional difficulties resulting from this fear were relatively high.

### ***Change in Role:***

Women spoke about their change in role in the relationship; they now saw their role as helping the inmate get through his time in prison. They tended to see themselves as being responsible for providing the inmate with emotional and material support throughout his sentence. Women tended to put these needs ahead of their own needs and often suffered because of this. Some women spoke about their role of 'keeping up his morale.' These women tended to feel their visits and other supports were imperative to his wellbeing and so went to enormous lengths to get to visits as well as making sacrifices in order to be able to provide him with money for 'buy ups', cigarettes and other items. One participant talked about the self harmful behaviours her partner had engaged in and put this in terms of why it was imperative that she supported him. The burden associated with visiting and providing inmates with money and other items took its toll on these women.

*I worry if I have enough money for him for the weekends, if I can get him a packet of lollies at least to get him through the week. Cause I don't see him all week, on Saturday and Sunday all I want to do is make it special for him, take him out some decent meals and things...or if I can't get a lift in to see him that makes me feel bad because that's what he waits for all week.*

Another women spoke about her plans to visit her husband at Christmas time:

*I have to be there, he's got no one else at Christmas.*

Fishman (1990) and Codd (2000) discuss the role changes which occur for women when a man becomes imprisoned. They become visitors, providers and counselors, as well as the main breadwinners.

The reasons behind this may have to do with some of the losses men experience when they become an inmate, which means that both men and women tend to become focused on the needs of the inmate. Aungles (1994) discusses the ways in which prison increases men's emotional dependence on their families. The increasing importance placed on emotional toughness and power in prison can mean prisoners' emotional dependence on women outside increases. Furthermore, imprisonment leads prisoners, in their relationship with their families outside, to define their own comfort as central to themselves and others; this 'selfishness' becomes an obsession with their relationship with their wife or girlfriend. The loss of control which an inmate experiences in daily life can mean that the only form of control he has is emotionally blackmailing his wife or partner (Aungles, 1994).

### ***Pressure from the inmate:***

An aspect of the change in relationship which needs to be considered is when a woman feels pressured by the demands an inmate sometimes places on her. It seems that

sometimes men placed excessive demands on women, including trying to control their movements and social contacts.

In the current study, one participant spoke about how her partner could sometimes ring her up to 5 times a day to check on her and ask her where she has been and who she had seen. This experience led her to comment:

*It's like seeing a totally different side to him.*

Most women experience being controlled and/or manipulated by their partners who are serving a prison sentence (Toepell & Greaves, 2001). The way this control is expressed includes: frequency of visits by women, accepting reverse charge calls, expectations that partners will relocate, trying to restrict women's associations and demanding that women account for how they spend their time (Toepell & Greaves, 2001). Similarly, Fishman (1991) found it common for partners of prisoners to try to provide men with parcels of food, clothes, etc., often to the detriment of themselves and their children. Some of these women reported satisfaction at being able to continue to nurture their husbands and indicated that this provided them with a sense of purpose and pride. Fishman further found that visiting day was the time when men either placed or received orders, and that having these orders accepted upheld their position as household head. Sometimes nurturing and supporting husbands included smuggling drugs or other contraband into prisons. A common reason given was that it helped to alleviate their husband's suffering.

### **Distress and difficulty coping with children:**

The women who had children indicated that a major stress factor was dealing with issues which arose when it was their children's father who was imprisoned. Women spoke at length about the children's grief, lack of understanding, the deterioration of their behaviour, their own difficulty coping as a single parent, and the emotional and practical difficulty of visiting with children. It was often the grief of their children which women found one of the most traumatic aspects of the sentence for example:

*...the children are going through exactly what the mother's going through. Like my kids go through so much. Not having dad around and they miss him. And so do I. And to see my kids hurt that hurts me and then that hurts him. And it keeps going round and round...the kids ask if dad can come home or if they can sleep over with dad. People worry about the partners but the kids go through these things as well.*

Another participant spoke about her children's grief:

*Yeah it's harder for the children I feel. Every time we visit it's the eldest crying cause he understands and he feels it hard, he's soft. He was crying yesterday, it's so hard, I just feel so bad. The first few weeks of visiting he was full on upset, cause they've got a playgroup and they did like going there but he was worried cause he wanted to spend time with his father so I said 'that's fine, you can stay back' and yeah he was just so upset.*

This woman then gave some idea of the effect this had on her:

*It's just hard. Like one weekend I was sort of crying because my 9 year old was crying and he comes out and says what's wrong and I said 'well look at your son.' It's sort of hard, like they mainly start me half the time. Like I do get upset on my own but like to see them hurt, it's...yeah.*

And continuing on, this participant who had 3 young children spoke about her youngest daughter's reaction:

*And the little one she's always saying 'dad's coming home soon when the sun comes up', it's hard. I did tell her that they will let him go and he will come home but like I don't know when, how long he's going to get. It's pretty hard. He's explained to the children that he won't be home for Christmas so they're not getting their hopes up.*

And another participant who had 5 children at home:

*If I was on my own I could cope. I can see the light at the end of the tunnel. I know there's a day, I can see (it) approaching. The children can't, they don't have any concept of how long it is. My five year old can't believe one day her daddy will be home, she thinks he's gone forever. When we go to the gaol she asks on occasion can we take Daddy with us?*

She then continued on to talk about some of the problems she was having as a single parent which were exacerbated because of her partner's imprisonment: (Talking about her 12 year old)

*Her behaviour has worsened since her father has been away. She knows I don't have any control over her and she is more than a handful. She is violent towards me and her siblings cause she knows her Dad is not here to keep things under control.*

This participant talked about how being a sole parent placed limitations on what the family could do. She alluded to how these limitations may in fact have been making her children more difficult to deal with:

*My daughter used to do ice skating and gymnastics, she can no longer do any of these, cause not only can I not afford it, but I haven't got the time to take her. ... There's a lot of things they miss out on um, going to the beach is not a possibility, I cannot keep my eye on five children at once.*

And then speaking about the impact that the issues associated with the children have on her, she continued:

*Quite often I get depressed, mainly because of the problems I'm having with the children, I can't deal with it on my own. The thing is I have support during the day, at night time I don't have any. That's when it's hard, that's when my children are at their worst.*

Some of the participants also highlighted some of the problems associated with visiting with children:

*But going up there to visit him I just couldn't do it, I couldn't take them every week. I couldn't handle it. Six hours doing nothing, it just can't be done with 2 kids. I could barely do it myself, I couldn't stand it.*

This participant then continued on to talk about the practical difficulty of getting away on her own on the weekends:

*That's the only thing I thought of, like the day I'd get home from the gaol I'd be thinking 'oh, now I've got to get next week' (babysiting) There's a lot of things on my mind. I felt bad when I didn't go.*

Some other studies focus on issues of women's increased caring responsibilities and restrictions on their freedom (Bakker et al., 1987; Fishman, 1988; Smith, 1986). Others have noted the impact on children in terms of the increased likelihood that children in this situation will develop behavioural and psychological problems because of the trauma of having a parent imprisoned (Lowenstein, 1986). The difficulties that mothers have in these circumstances are often compounded because of their fear that children will become involved in criminal behaviour (Codd, 2000).

### **Difficulties in dealing with the system:**

The participants generally reported that dealing with the gaol system was an additional stress factor. The majority of the participants reported difficulty around dealing with corrective services. The difficulties expressed centred around: feeling intimidated by gaols, inadequate facilities for visits, not having knowledge about rules and regulations of gaols, frustration about changing rules or inconsistent rules, being frustrated in attempts to find out information about the status of the inmate including not being informed about significant events such as transfers or being released and being treated disrespectfully, including having to wait for long periods of time at visiting.

One woman spoke of finding out about being searched once it happened:

*Until he went in I'd never been into a gaol before and the first time I went I got searched. It really spun me out.*

And the perceived lack of information for visitors was frequently commented on:

*Bathurst has no signs either, it was terrible the first day he went in there my sister went to see him...because I was really devastated...she went to maximum and she waited there for 50 minutes before they let her in and then they said 'oh he's not here, he's over in minimum. There is no sign at all, anywhere saying where x wing and the minimum wing is, none.*

This woman continued:

*There is no information anywhere outside the gaol saying anything, you get to the gate they won't let you bring a mobile phone in.*

And then in talking about the processes of booking in:

*See you don't get told any of this either, the families don't get told a thing, you just turn up*

Many women spoke about the difficulties caused by transfers including the fact that sometimes they arrived for a visit only to find that the inmate was not there.

*They don't let you know a lot...they said you'll have to come back again tomorrow. I made arrangements and came back the next day and they said 'sorry, because of the breakout he and 30 others are being moved over to Longbay', they didn't tell me until I'd travelled all the way to Homebush that he wasn't there.*

And for another woman it was hard to make plans:

*You see I was thinking I should sell the house and move to Bathurst...but who knows, I could do that and he'd be moved again. I mean this is the freak out part about it, you don't know where the hell you are.*

For some women, incidences of being treated disrespectfully had impacted significantly:

*The staff treat the prisoners like nothing and they treat us as if we're in gaol as well.*

*I'll never forget when I first arrived at gaol for the first time in my life and there were no toilets working, the Ladies room, the woman told me, 'you can just go over in the park. That's what she told me and ... I mean you get people treating you like dirt. I've never had that happen to me in my life and it's a real shock.*

Some participants also discussed having to wait for long periods at visits or even missing out on seeing the inmate:

*Sometimes you don't get in or you can wait all day.*

And in talking about the visiting area:

*Um, well, it's a bit unpleasant, the room's awful of course as you know, the tables are too far apart for us couples, we've got to sit 6 feet apart, everyone overhears your conversation and you hear theirs.*

Other studies conducted in England and America suggest widespread difficulty in dealing with gaol facilities (Ferraro et. al, 1983; Light, 1995). One study which surveyed visitors to NSW Correctional centres also found discontent among visitors about some of the rules and regulations relating to visiting (Eyland, 1996). This included perceived inconsistencies in what was allowed to be taken into visits, being treated like criminals by some staff, long delays in waiting for visits and sometimes waiting in vain for a visit. Other comments made in this survey related to facilities available at visiting and included: not enough space, inadequate childcare facilities, unpleasant waiting areas, visiting areas too noisy, lack of tea/ coffee facilities, a perceived need for opportunity to purchase nutritious food and access to adequate toilet facilities.

### **Difficulty with accommodation, transport and finances.**

A major stress factor for all of the participants was the practical and financial burden, which arose because of lifestyle changes caused by the separation. Changes in lifestyle included travelling on weekends to visit the inmate so that a significant stress factor for the majority of the participants was the difficulty of accessing affordable transport and accommodation. The expense of travelling for these women was a considerable cost and often included the cost of overnight accommodation for themselves but also sometimes children. There were also incidental costs involved with travelling such as buying lunch. Supplying the inmate with money and items such as cigarettes also contributed to financial burden.

*We've been going there every 2-3 weeks, it's been very costly, very expensive, and it's cost a lot of money to do this. So you're penalised both emotionally and physically because I've been exhausted and also cost wise...it's very expensive, as I said it's costing us about 150 dollars a week if we visit every week, we worked it out and it was about 400 dollars a month, because we send our son 50-100 dollars a fortnight, and then if we visit it's another 100 dollars in petrol....it's a 5 hour drive there and five hours drive back, and we buy food at my sister's place, we buy meals, if we visit him we buy meals, you know what I mean, and then giving him money as well. So it's not cheap at all.*

The practical difficulties associated with accessing gaols without a private vehicle was a problem that affected many of the women. One participant spoke about the difficulty of getting to the gaol from Kelso without a vehicle with 3 young children on a Sunday when there is no bus. It took them an hour and a half to walk each way. Participants frequently experienced difficulty with getting public transport to the gaol:

*The first time I ever went up there I took my kids, I had to take a train a 4 o'clock in the morning from Newcastle...then you've got to sit there for three hours til you can go to the gaol, then the visits finish at 3pm and the only train out of there is at 9 o'clock at night.*

*It's hard, it's stressful, it's my responsibility at home with the 3 kids, it's changed a hell of a lot, like I've got to find a way to get to Bathurst and back, get accommodation.*

A couple of the women resorted to dangerous behaviours such as sleeping at the station and sleeping in their cars. Others spoke about the difficulties with bunking in with others, I asked one of the participants how she was finding sharing her friend's house:

*It causes fights, she's not used to having kids around. She doesn't have kids. So she's gone to stay at her mum's house.*

Women spoke about the everyday financial difficulty they experienced, one mother of three who was reliant on Centrelink payments spoke about the increased financial burden:

*People think he's away and you shouldn't have as many bills but for some reason you end up with more. Travel, food expenses, cigarettes, making sure they're alright, plus the family at home is alright. The money just doesn't stretch as far as it used to.*

Financial burden was also experienced for the first time by some women who lost the income from their partner who was previously in a well paying job:

*I'm extremely worried about it, that's one of my underlying things. That I'm going to lose my house, that my husband's going to have nothing when he comes out, we're going to owe thousands of dollars, so you know, it's a very big worry.*

Other factors which contributed to financial burden included: relocating to a different area and sometimes giving up employment to do this, being less available for employment because of committing to weekend visits.

Financial distress is often cited by families of prisoners as one of the major problems they face (Aungles, 1994; Bakker et al., 1978; Ferraro et al., 1983). Some women, particularly middle income women, experience poverty for the first time because of incarceration (Fishman, 1991) while lower income women tend to have pre-existing financial difficulties exacerbated (Bakker et al., 1978; Davis, 1991; Fishman, 1988b; Fishman, 1991). This is a punishment to the family outside which leads to a severe economic penalty during imprisonment and for many years to come after imprisonment (Aungles, 1994).

Incarceration can mean the loss of an income as well as additional costs occurring. When the incarceration means the loss of a breadwinner the wife must then secure another source of income which can be extremely difficult since most inmates and partners are young, poor and have little formal education (Carlson & Cervera, 1991). Many women report a conflict in wanting to nurture their partners by meeting their requests on a very limited income (Davis, 1991). Some of the additional costs include supplying approved material goods as well as illegal goods (Fishman, 1991), long distance phone calls and travel to prisons including meals and sometimes accommodation (this cost is compounded when children are involved) (Davis, 1991; Fishman, 1991). Women are clearly disadvantaged by the imprisonment of a partner or family member through increased costs as well as practical difficulty in accessing goals.

The difficulties faced by women who have a partner/family member in prison are clearly numerous but it is hoped that identification and documentation of some of the issues will help raise awareness and be a tool for possible steps forward in the future.

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