

# Her Caribbean Blues: The Female Prison Experience



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**Received:** 📅 September 04, 2018; **Published:** 📅 September 21, 2018

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## Abstract

In recent history, women were considered the “forgotten offenders.” However, a number of global-political changes have led to an increase in the female prison population; subsequently, this population has become the focus of considerable research. Even so, little inquiry has examined how females experience prison, as well an examination of the female prison experience in developing countries, where the penal culture is significantly different from the U.S., is even more limited. Conversely, both classic and contemporary prison studies have well documented the social world of male offenders, particularly how males experience prison and the perils of imprisonment. This exploratory study examines the ways women in a Caribbean nation experience prison and the challenges they encounter while in prison. Findings indicate that the women faced multiple changes, however, two broad challenges related to their incarceration were prominent. These included the threat of losing pieces of their social identity and trying to cope with a penal culture that threatened to reshape how these women viewed themselves.

## Her Caribbean Blues: The Female Prison Experience

Until recent decades, a significant amount of the correctional literature and research have focused on male offenders. As a result, female offenders have often been referred to as the “forgotten” offenders Belknap [1], Fletcher, Shaver, Moon [2], Pollock [3], Zaithzow, Thomas [4]. The primary explanations for this oversight are that females make up a small portion of the prison population, their criminality is not viewed as serious as their male counterparts, and they are not considered to be the major breadwinners in the family. Hence, very little attention was devoted to understanding who the female offender is, as well as understanding her social world within the prison environment. However, recent scholarship has advanced knowledge of female offenders in areas such as trends in arrests and processing, punishment, risk and protective factors, the profiles of female offenders, the onset of criminality, gender responsive programs, and the components of these programs that promote promising targets for change that can aid in the successful reintegration of the female offender back into the community Belknap[1], Pollock [3], Chesney Lind & Pasko [5], Lopez Garza [6], MacKenzie et al. [7], Owen & Bloom [8], Solinger et al. [9], Wormer [10]. Nevertheless, there has been less inquiry into how females experience prison Belknap [1], Fletcher et al. [2], Girshick [11], Lopez Garza [6]. Conversely, both classic and contemporary prison studies have focused on the social world of male offenders, particularly how males experience prison and the

perils of imprisonment Clemmer [12], Johnson & Toch [13], Sykes [14], Zamble & Porporinio [15]. While there is some literature that provides information on the challenges women face in prison, there is a paucity of literature on how they actually experience and cope with the prison environment. Given the limited amount of literature that has examined the female prison experience and the lack of related scholarship in Caribbean nations, this paper contributes to the current body of literature that have examined how females experience prison by providing insights from females incarcerated in a Caribbean nation. Although there is literature about women incarcerated in the United States, there is very limited literature about the experiences of women incarcerated in the Caribbean. Morris [16] notes that “although more is known about the conditions of Caribbean prisons, little is known, however, about the social world of inmates and their experiences in these deprived [and] atypical prison environments” (p. 37). This study seeks to add to the current body of empirical inquiry into the social world of female offenders by exploring the female prison experience in the Caribbean.

## Gender and the Prison Experience through the Lens of Social Identity Theory

Gender studies suggest that not only are men and women socialized differently, but also, they experience institutions in qualitatively different ways Coman [17]. Women tend to be more

integrated into family and friend networks and, if they are mothers, often view this role as a predominant role in their lives. The prison experience disrupts the connections women have to these important relationships in their lives. Specifically, prison life separates women from children and family, replacing these relationships with a strict social structure and a lack of familial support. Given that the maternal role and familial and friend support are essential elements to the female psyche, the removal of these elements from the lives of women creates a stressor for women. In addition, understanding how women self-identify, as well as understanding the socialization process that begins long before a woman is incarcerated helps to shape a positive experience for the female offender through the transformation of her social identity and the development of a fervent sense of self-efficacy. Social identity theory describes how we view our self-image in terms of the categories or groups to which we belong. These social categories or groups help to shape who we are, who we think we are, who we become, and how we interact with those both inside and outside our specific groups. Likewise, social interactions serve to support beliefs in our self-images and the view others hold of our self-image Guan & So [18]. As a result of the social construction of identity, we may view ourselves through a combination of many elements, which may include, but are not limited to, gender, race, and sexual orientation. Zavalloni [19] identified three important aspects related to establishing social identity in both men and women:

- a) How one perceives himself or herself within a social category (the in-group)
- b) The role of “mental images” in forming a self-concept
- c) The motivational factors that create action or inaction in certain social settings (p. 82).

Theorists have long recognized that socialization from early childhood and beyond, termed the social environment, are key factors in forming social identity. Zavalloni [19] considers, at a bare minimum, a person’s nationality, the culture (ethnic and religious) in which he or she is reared, possibly the family’s socioeconomic status, and the family’s politics as the social environment. Collectively or individually, these components have a substantial effect on identity, both social and personal. Therefore, classification based upon these categories places each person in a specific group; the in-group that shapes childhood, adolescence, and adulthood Guan & So [18], Zavalloni [19], Breinlinger & Kelly [20]. In addition, essential to determining social identity is the development of certain behaviors that are established through social interaction Guan & So [18]. When identifying self-image, a woman will often relate to various groups, such as families or social networks, and, depending upon the image or reputation of the group, adapt her self-image to match that of the group Guan & So [18]. Thus, in order to explore how social identity can affect a woman’s prison experience, an examination of the “females’ interaction and relationships with others or their affiliations with particular social groups” is warranted Guan & So [18], p. 590). Hence, how a woman

cope with the experience of incarceration can be based on her self-image during her prison stay. Equally important is the notion of how the concept of self-image promotes self-efficacy Breinlinger & Kelly [20]. In believing that she can perform certain practices, which may result in specific outcomes, a woman with a strong sense of self-efficacy will effectively use her social identity or self-image to foster positive outcomes Breinlinger & Kelly [20], Guan & So [18], Zavalloni [19]. Consequently, social identity, or self-image, as well as self-efficacy becomes an important element in how women will adapt to incarceration and cope with the pains of separation from children and family.

Likewise, Gove [21] speaks about the unpredictability of life and the many instances that take our lives in directions beyond our control, and in what way do these unpredictable moments shape our future lives. Incarceration becomes one of those instances that is unpredictable and takes the lives of many women in not only a different direction, but also along paths in which they do not know how to cope. Gove [21] equally expressed the “importance of a meaningful life” as being a component to having a “sense of satisfaction,” as well as serving as a stepping-stone for directing the actions and motivations of individuals (p. 371). Gove [21] also points out that acquisition of a meaningful life takes “considerable effort,” and there are many who are not motivated to allocate that effort (p. 372). When faced with negative feelings of not having that “sense of satisfaction” prior to the prison experience, women may strive to attain a meaningful life in some manner while incarcerated Gove [21]. The ways in which women attempt to attain this meaningful life may be shaped by the culture and resources of the prison environment. Prisons are not equally situated with respect to resources, and prisons in developing countries are not only different culturally but may lack the resources and programs that are found in prisons in developed countries (Morris, 2008). Thus, where one is incarcerated may further influence ones’ ability to achieve a meaningful life behind prison walls. Similarly, most people work towards a social identity that is valued and provides for positive reinforcement. Society generally compares women with men, resulting in the female social identity appearing negative Breinlinger & Kelly [20], Gove [21], Guan & So [18]. Men are considered superior and of a higher value, while women generally “internalize the dominant ideology that ascribes their sex with negative value” Breinlinger & Kelly [20]. For instance, if a woman assumes she is in a low-status group, such as being in prison, she may use strategic moves to improve her social identity, and, conceivably, the in-group status as well. Therefore, Breinlinger and Kelly [20] suggest that in order for a woman to lift her status, she needs to move away from the low-status group, both psychologically and physically, through disassociation, otherwise termed “individual mobility” (p. 2). This strategy involves utilizing those values typically assigned to men (power, authority, and determination) and comparing them positively to values generally assigned to women (negotiation, nurturing abilities, and skills on an interpersonal level). This social identity strategy may well

explain the use of pseudo families as a means of coping with prison life. Female inmates may feel that being considered as the head of a pseudo family, or a member of a pseudo family will likely improve their view of themselves, thereby creating a more positive self-image Collica [22], Giallombardo [23].

By the same token, a young woman feeling the effects of a negative social identity, generated from poor social conditions such as living in the inner-city or urban areas or incarceration, learns how to navigate through such conditions by learning survival tactics. For example, in her research, Jones [24] found that a young woman who maintains a reputation as a fighter and winner has a positive social identity, which serves as “an important social resource because it can provide young women with a sense of security and confidence with which they can navigate their neighborhoods and school environments” (p. 52). The young women who are not fortunate enough to have that winner reputation and, consequently a negative social identity, find other schemes to cope with the violence to lesser degrees of triumph. The fighters, with their winning reputations and positive social identities, are able to gain and keep the respect and authority required to survive. Additionally, these young women have the capacity to help those less able to protect themselves Jones [24]. Surviving inner-city impoverished neighborhoods parallel being incarcerated given that the social environments of both produce similar poor social conditions. Methods used in the survival of impoverished social conditions is the dependence on family and faith. These two components often provide a young woman with a “relatively stable support system...to insulate herself from various forms of conflict” give that the inner city is riddled with violence that becomes the everyday experiences of young women similar to the daily life in prison Jones [24] (p. 56). As a result, many of these young women “insulate themselves from potential conflicts... by limiting the strength of their social relations with other young women”, thereby reducing the chance of being involved in trivial confrontations that often escalate into violence Jones [24] (p. 59). Violence and conflict in the inner city and urban areas directly links to crime, the social structure of interpersonal relations, and the social identities of the residents Jones [24]. Similarly, the prison environment can be a source of violence in ones’ daily life, thus prompting women to potentially employ similar survival methods to improve their social identities. With the lack of family contact, turning to other inmates and the strength of their faith can solidify a more positive self-image for them. As a final point, the cultural construction of crime and criminals plays a significant role in the social identity of incarcerated women. Female offenders are doubly marginalized in society. Specifically, as women, they are disadvantaged prior to incarceration because of the “socio-cultural environment” where options for women are limited Ajzenstadt [25] (p. 203). In addition, criminalized cultures, particularly marginalized collections such as women, are seen as threatening to the ethics and legal control of the moral entrepreneurs and those considered in positions of power, such as politicians Ferrell [26]. This cultural criminalization, which is postured in the “public

realm”, greatly subsidizes negative societal perceptions and lowers social identity, which in turn creates cyclic marginalization of the specified groups Ferrell [26] (p. 406).

As previously discussed, social identity theory suggests that it is not so much what an individual prefers or desires, but more so “their beliefs about themselves and the world” Aguiar & de Francisco [27] (p. 548). Thus, if an individual or their group is stigmatized, or marginalized, self-perceptions will be equally stigmatized and marginalized. For the incarcerated woman, the ability to categorize oneself becomes the manner in which her social identity is formed. Regardless if the self-categorization is through culture, gender, age, sexual orientation, or any other status or personal identifier, social identity is the marker with which the female’s place in society is held, including the society within the prison walls. Incarceration may serve as a threat to the typical ways in which women come to identify themselves because of the ways in which incarceration cuts women off from the very entities and relationships that typically help them to define who they are. Furthermore, the context of incarceration plays a role in how women experience prison. As stated earlier, while the literature on the female prison experience has been overshadowed by the literature on the male prison experience, the literature on the experience of women in prisons within developing countries in the Caribbean is more scant. Nonetheless, based on what has been published, one of the fundamental issues women face in Caribbean prisons is a lack of resources and programs that are designed to ameliorate the effects of loss. Due to the growth of the prison industrial complex in the United States, U.S. prison have incorporated a number of different programs for women; however, the growth of the female prison population in the Caribbean is a fairly new phenomenon. As such, the availability of resources and programs for women incarcerated in the Caribbean is a relatively new work in progress Sumter et al. [28,29]. Given this reality, this research seeks to assess the experiences of women incarcerated in a prison setting in the Caribbean. This exploratory study seeks to examine the experiences of women in a prison setting that is not only culturally distinct from the U.S., but also different with respect to the availability of resources that specifically address the needs of women.

## Methods

Data for this exploratory, qualitative research study was extracted from a larger study designed to develop a profile of the female offenders remanded and incarcerated in a Caribbean prison. The purpose of the larger study was to understand how the onset of criminality, as well as demographics, educational and/or work history, social and/or economic factors, and prior abuse may explain the decision to engage in criminal and other problematic behaviors, and to also examine drug trafficking among female offenders. Sixty-five women completed a comprehensive questionnaire that included primarily quantitative questions and two open-ended questions. The recruitment process for the current study was carried out by the prison staff, which included

prison officers from the research unit and the supervisor at the female prison. The female supervisor assembled the entire female population in the Multi-Purpose room, where information concerning the purpose and overview of the research process, a verbal statement acknowledging the confidentiality of the research process, the voluntary nature of the research study, and the option to volunteer in the project or decline participation at any time were discussed. Furthermore, verbal consent was obtained to maintain confidentiality. The females who volunteered to participate in this study were not provided any compensation. Out of approximately 120 female offenders at the facility, 65 females (which included 13 females who were purposively selected via stratified sampling to participate in the semi-structured interviews regarding drug trafficking) volunteered to participate in the study. The females included remanded offenders awaiting trial (N = 20) and convicted offenders (N = 45). The survey instrument used in this study is a modified version of the most comprehensive assessment instrument to date, designed to capture a profile of female offenders in the state of California. The instrument was developed and validated by Barbara Owen and Barbara Bloom in 1995. Our survey instrument also included two open-ended questions. The first question asked the women to discuss what it was like living in prison. The second question asked the women if there was any additional information they wanted to share with the researchers. Prior to carrying out the research, approval to conduct the research was obtained from the Old Dominion University's full Institutional Review Board. The open-ended questions were transcribed verbatim and coded into NVivo to determine patterns/common themes which emerged around specific feedback documenting what it was like living in prison from the female's perspective. Creswell [30] explains that coding is the "process of organizing the material into chunks or segments of text before bringing meaning to information" and is an integral segment in qualitative research procedures (p. 186). The process of open coding was utilized and is defined as "data [being] broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences" Babbie [31] (pg. 401). Emergent codes were identified to reflect the prison experience from the female's perspective. This process involved coding and organizing their comments based on themes that arose from the analysis Berg [32].

## Results

Sample descriptive data are presented in Table 1. A total of 65 females volunteered to participate in this initial study. The female offenders included those convicted (N = 45) and those awaiting trial (N = 20). More than half of the female offenders (64.7 percent) reported Trinidad and Tobago as their domicile, while England (9.2 percent), Canada (7.7 percent), and Jamaica (6.2 percent) were the other three major countries of origin. The average woman in this study was a Trinidadian by birth and 32 years of age, with nearly half of them being between the ages of 25 and 34. The marital statuses of the female offenders participating in this study revealed that approximately 17 percent were married while slightly more

than half of the women were single, divorced, or separated. Also, approximately 29 percent of the women considered themselves as being involved in a common-law marriage. Nearly 45 percent of the female offenders surveyed had an educational attainment at the secondary level while only 6 percent reported to have completed school at the university level. Approximately 25 percent of the female offenders surveyed had an educational attainment at the primary level and the tertiary level. While just about three-fourths of the women were employed in some capacity (i.e., full-time, part-time, seasonal); for the most part, they were unemployed and had sporadic work patterns the year before their current sentence. Moreover, 32 percent were employed part-time and/or seasonal, half of the women worked less than six months the year before their current incarceration, and 43 percent reported having two or more jobs during the year prior to their current incarceration. The current scholarship examined ways in which women experienced prison. The qualitative data yielded seven major themes, to include: mother-child contact, maintaining contact with family and friends, pains of imprisonment, inmate-staff relations, reentry preparation, judicial and penal reform, and periods of self-reflection. The quotes from the women are represented in this paper verbatim. Consequently, any grammatical "errors" or use of slang reflects how the women answered the questions, which allowed the researchers to 'tag' the females' voice and to accurately reflect their feelings and thoughts Creswell [30,33].

## Mother-Child Contact

Many of the women expressed frustration, anguish, and guilt as a result of being separated from their children. Specifically, the women reported that the single most difficult deprivation of being incarcerated was the estrangement from their children. For example, one of the women offered this observation, It is very hard to be away from children. Although my children are grown adults, they are my babies when they call me. As a convicted foreigner I only get to talk to my children (grandchildren) twice a month. Related to this idea, another of the women explained, "It's also very very hard if you're a mother missing my daughter so badly." The pains of separation from their children and the maternal anxiety they experienced were compounded by the limited contact the women had with their children. One of the women explained, As of now we only have 2 phone calls and 2 letters each month which is not enough to correspond to our love ones. Especially being in a different country miles and miles away from home. Having the kids at school and can only speak to them on weekend when the office will be closed M-F it's very difficult to get in contact with them. Therefore, some of the women recommended that more contact with their children, not only for their sense of peace, but also to maintain a maternal bond with their children, be provided. As one of the women reported, more visitation rights with children to build a relationship with them. Children grieve a lot for their parents, especially women who are on a Capital charge. Echoing similar sentiments, another woman commented, there are always both negative and positive sides in every place and situation. As a

parent I need more time with my kids, more letters forms. Given that motherhood is a significant social identity for women and has often been described as a master status for women Ridgeway & Correll [34], it is not surprising that women who are incarcerated find it difficult to be separated from their children. The abrupt loss of regular contact with children significantly disrupts the roles and responsibilities associated with motherhood.

**Maintaining Contact with Family and Friends:** The women also communicated the misery that resulted from being isolated from family and friends. For instance, one of the women reported, being without family and friends away from your home is very nerve racking on the inside of the prison. “So far, being away from family is the worst thing that has happened to me right now... Is the very big impact. We’re are not free. Especially as a foreigners like me. Repeatedly, the women mentioned the importance of having more contact with their families and friends while incarcerated. One of the women stated, We also need more participation or interactions with family member, eg (I) phone to speak to family member at least on weekends. (II) Family visit on weekends or one weekend day per month...Other women agreed commenting, Communication would be one of the aspects, it would help with you not being able to be around you family but you would still be in contact, if it being able to write them, more than once for the month and being able to receive messages promptly, if you’re able to speak personally to them on the phone. Because they are so far away I don’t get to see them and only get 3 letter forms a month to send to family, friends. It is difficult for me as an inmate to stay in control with everyone. Embassy does not come but every 3 months at a time. So anything our family sends is far and few times a year. I go anywhere from 6-8 months at a time doing without. The women specifically noted that the communication provided a support system for them while helping them to maintain connections with their children and the community. The women also noted that the support from relatives enhanced their emotional survival. The findings concerning contact with family and friends is also significantly linked to the social identity of women pre-incarceration. Women are more likely to be tied into family and friend networks that provide emotional and instrumental support Ridgeway & Correll [34], Rothman [35]. The loss of regular contact with these networks was viewed as a significant loss for these women. The next section of findings, which include pains of imprisonment, inmate-staff relations, reentry preparation, judicial and penal reform, and periods of self-reflection, underscore how the culture of the penal system in the Caribbean, as well as the resources associated with prison systems in developing countries have the potential to shape the social identity of incarcerated women. Women discussed how several characteristics of the penal system, not only caused them to feel a sense of loss, similar to their discussions of motherhood and family and friends but reshaped how they thought about themselves.

### Pains of Imprisonment

In this section of the findings, women reported the ways in which they were forced to adapt to a very different culture in prison.

A number of the women highlighted specific types of deprivation described by Sykes [14], specifically, lack of liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy, and security. The women discussed the lack of freedom to come and go as they please or visit with their children, family and friends when and as often as they desired. One of the women commented, As a foreigner I think it is harder for us as we cannot speak to our families more than twice a month over the phone. We also cannot make phone calls to try and sort out any situations, personal, legal, or otherwise. Plus, we are limited to 3 letters a month which is also hard. Likewise, the women noted that they are subject to extreme control and a vast body of rules and regulations which are sometimes harsh. One of the women explained, Women don’t have as many rights in prison as I would have expected! There are always both negative and positive sides in every place and situation. Women need to be heard, we don’t have a voice. Similarly, as noted by Sykes [14], many of the women were deprived of the goods and services to which they were accustomed since they were stripped of most of their worldly possessions by the Prison Service as soon as they entered the facility. One of the women offered this perspective, well it’s not the best but it’s not the worst, but time on remand don’t count, there no airing, no classes, if in a cell then you use pail (bucket). Bread and rice every day, having problems at home, talking to a friend who said did I want a holiday, he said I just had to bring a box of cake mix back which was cocaine, no way would I get caught, didn’t think much about it, just wanted to get away from home, (problems), all was paid for, spending money, didn’t pay for anything. But it ended up that I had to bring 28 pot of gel with cocaine at the bottom, sniffer dog just walked just past me, then got on plane, then police came and took me off. Since the women were not privileged with conjugal visits, the women also commented on another deprivation documented by Sykes [14], the deprivation of heterosexual relationships. This often led to the development of pseudo families, as well as widespread homosexuality. Specifically, some of the women noted their disdain for the homosexual activity that took place, as well as a desire for an increased presence of male prison officers at the facility. As one of the women stated, “Unlimited gossip and lesbianism, deceitfulness, confusion all the time. Need different ways to discipline inmates. Lack of male officers working at W.P.”

A broad definition of culture includes the material, such as goods and services, and non-material, to include, values, ideologies, mores, and folkways, which are integral parts of any society Durkheim [36]. When members of society are incarcerated, many of the tenants of the culture they have become accustomed to may no longer be available to them. This not only creates a sense of loss but fosters cultural adaptations to replace what has been lost. Based on the work of Sykes [14], the experience of deprivation creates a subculture within the prison setting. This subculture is designed to replace pieces of the material, such as goods and services, and the non-material, i.e. the ability to execute behaviors related to fundamental ideas like liberty and autonomy. It has been noted in the literature that prisoners typically go through a process of prisonization whereby inmates learn the rules that reflect the

culture of the prison setting. The effectiveness of prisonization is influenced by a number of factors. Two factors that are of particular interest to this study are the length of time incarcerated and the type of relationships inmates have outside the prison. As discussed below, the inmates in this study identified the length of their sentences and being cut off from children, family, and friends as problematic. This would suggest a greater likelihood of prisonization for these inmates. One issue that the prisonization literature does not adequately address is the extent to which prisons in foreign developing countries may actually accelerate the prisonization process. The level of deprivation experienced by inmates in these settings, as well as limited resources for programs may accelerate the process. The findings in this section suggest that some of the deprivations associated with prison life forced women to engage in behaviors they would not normally engage in. The lack of certain material goods forced women to improvise. In addition, the lack of opportunities to continue heterosexual relationships through conjugal visits led some women to turn to lesbian relationships as an alternative or to withdraw from associating with other women.

### Inmate-Staff Relations

The women pointed out the lack of professionalism and mistreatment received from some of the prison officers. The women contended that they were poorly treated in an inhumane fashion by the prison officers. For example, a couple of the women stated, If the officers working here would come to work and do just that. Not criticize and belittle inmates especially about whatever they're charged for. Have an open mind to change because not every individual is the same. And not because an inmate is charged for murder you go around referring to us as "Murderers", as some of us are still on remand. And stop being judgmental and branding people by their charge and discussing "here-say" from the newspapers which aren't always right to make assumptions about you and be telling other inmates not to associate with this one or that one because of our charge/s. The officers most of them are partial and biased to certain remandees and inmates. We are treated subhuman and talked down and looked down on. We have less privileges than convicted and less benefits. The women believed that the mistreatment often resulted in inherent conflict between them and the prison officers, noting that the prison officers should enforce one set of rules that are applied equally across the board, in a consistent manner. Moreover, some of the women claimed that the prison officers often acted unfairly by exhibiting impartiality toward certain offenders. As noted by one of the women, the officers most of them are partial and biased to certain reminders and inmates. We are treated subhuman and talked down and looked down on. We have less privileges than convicted and less benefits.

Note the statement from another one of the women, no fairness and a lot of favoritism amount the inmates with officers. Punishment for small things, such as I got lock down because I told another inmate that her friend got lock-down. And if an inmate uses obscene and they get no punishment. While others get lock-down for the

same offence. Finally, the women also questioned the qualifications of a number of the prison officers, noting that the prison officers did not have the credentials to work in the prison and lacked conflict resolution and interpersonal communication skills, therefore, needed more education and training. One of the women offered the following observation, "Trinidad and Tobago need to train there officers better you do things better." Reverberating similar feelings, another woman commented, "Prison officer's needs training in dealing with inmates in relation to offences." The women felt that if the prison officers were more kind and understanding towards them, this would improve the rapport between the prison officers and the women, which in turn, would make the prison officers' jobs easier. The belittling of female inmates for their crimes, whether remanded or convicted, created an environment in which women were constantly reminded of their stigmatized and marginalized status. Thus, the identity of women as "criminals" was difficult to escape.

### Reentry Preparation

Although, the women reported having a great deal of free time, a boredom, idleness, and the scarcity of rehabilitation and training programs emerged as big problems. More specifically, the women noted the need for the Prison Service to prepare them for life outside the walls. As one of the women described, my experience here is not what I think prison should be like. There is no real programs here to reform prisoners and sending us out to the world a better and more informed adult about drugs, trafficking or crime. In a similar fashion, one of the women explained, there is very little for women incarcerated to do besides religious services. As for foreigners it is even worse because most "vocational" programs are limited to locals. Another one of the women was more specific stating, Inmates needs to be a bit more liberal, we need to have more rehabilitated programs, then idle inmate would stay out of trouble and it will be less stress for the correction officers. The or we Inmates need to have re-entry programmes that would READY us back for society. Some of the women indicated that they appreciated the forms of programming that was offered by the Prison Service, however, asked for more programs that would help them overcome drug addiction, obtain employment upon release, and become better parents. A couple of the women commented, The or we Inmates need to have re-entry programmes that would READY us back for society... And programmes that would help us inmates to have more respect for each other. (INMATE – OFFICER) MORE LITERARY PROGRAMMS. "EDUCATION is ALWAYS the KEY"! Yes inside this place need more educations more trades so that we can do when we get back outside. So that we don't have to wander off into the same offences, we will not occupy ourselves with the trade. The lack of programs the women described may have worked to further reinforce the identity of women as criminals and as a stigmatized population. The lack of "programs", as the inmates referred to them, may be a combination of the penal culture in the Caribbean and the lack of resources devoted to funding services for a population that is generally viewed as undeserving.

## Judicial and Penal Reform

Concerns were expressed about the length of time spent on remand before the actual trial took place as well as the fact that the time did not count towards the actual sentence received from the Courts. It was not unusual for an offender to spend five to ten years remanded, and upon being sentenced, there was no sentence reduction for the time spent in remand. One of the women stated, "...too long to wait for prelim inquiry." Another one of the women added, At the end of the day, its jail! It's not a hotel. You commit a crime, you do your time! But, it's unfair to people who are innocent like me on a capital charge waiting four years for a trial date. The justice system's too slow! And their motto is "money talks and Bull S\*\*T walks"...so all the innocent people are locked up here while the real hardcore criminals are outside free!! Specifically, some of the women were concerned that they had not been convicted of any crime for which they were detained. One of the women explained, Remain in remand until their trial A respondent explained, I believe this system is 'abused' sometimes I believe we lived in stone aged times. I don't see 2020 Vision at all. I'm remanded innocently here, and I'm being treated as if I'm convicted. The women also noted the need for judicial reform, such as having time served on remand count towards the actual sentence, a more speedy trial, as well as a change in the sentencing structure for some offenses, such as murder. For example, one of the women suggested, Length of time being spent on remand especially for capital charge women before getting a High Court Date. The law must be changed to assist women and to better break down charges eg: 1st degree, 2nd degree, 3rd degree, murder etc. Stated another way, one of the other women commented, Judicial system is too slow, women wait too long for Court Dates. Twice a year visit with children is not enough. More programs needed to highlight skills of women behind bars. Officer and inmates' workshop for better interaction. System talks restoration but does retribution that need work most importantly. Likewise, some of the women noted that they maintained good behavior, engaged in a number of rehabilitation programs for self-improvement, and felt that they had changed. Specifically, the women with long sentences and convicted of capital charges called for correctional reforms such as the implementation of a parole system. I strongly believe that our country and Penal Reform department should form a parole board or look into the length of years there are women lost in the system. People change and sometimes most of us women are here because of circumstances beyond our control. But there's no separate entity to investigate the issue, always the verdict is guilty and banished from society. Based on the results from this section, it is clear that women spent significant periods of time waiting for trial on remand or serving out their entire sentences without the hope of early release. The long period of immersion in the prison culture for many of these women meant more exposure to situations that had the potential to reshape their identities. These long stays coupled with what the women viewed as a lack of programs created an environment in which the self-efficacy of the women was challenged.

## Periods of Self-Reflection

While the women took the opportunity to discuss the perils of suffering, as well as the difficulties, pressures, and pains of being imprisoned, they also noted the immediacy of the impact of their imprisonment. For these women, prison gave them a "time out" from their self-destructive behavior on the streets, which provided an opportunity for deep introspection; to reflect and ponder on how their behaviors and actions contributed to their current circumstances. Several of the women explained, We're are not free. Especially as a foreigners like me. But I learned so many things in here. I got disciplines myself in here. The prison in here not so bad as what I heard compare the prison where I came from...I'm still thankful with this. The prison experience here has been a challenge in my life because I had to battle with myself to be strong I've never been in prison before and it's been a roller coaster ride and I've learned very much that you can have a lot and loose it just like that and living without what you are accustomed to can be a very hard challenge. My experience here has been very helpful in some ways because it has opened my eyes to a lot of things that I never thought would be important to me and hopefully I will very reformed when I get out to help other women like myself so that they don't make the same mistakes as I have. I came from San Fernando, I was charged for trafficking cocaine, this is my first trafficking offence and I don't plan on coming back to TTPS and my experience here was a good lesson learned. For some of the women, the time served in prison offered an opportunity to atone for their past behavior and seek forgiveness from their higher power, while starting the journey for a new beginning in life. One of the women stated, "It brought me closer to god and my family and more self-control." Another woman added, I can only speak for myself, being in prison I have learnt to interact with people whom outside I never would have looked at much less spoken with, I learnt we are all equal we all cry, laugh and feel pain, we all Long for the same things, Love, family, home, security, a relationship with God, mostly Freedom.

Finally, the women noted the importance and benefits of the rehabilitation programs offered by the Prison Service. The women in prison used the time to reflect on their lives, take advantage of education, vocational and therapeutic opportunities, and were making plans to do better when they are released from prison. For instance, one of the women commented, "I think the classes are helpful for rehabilitation, but I think their needs to be more lengthy and intense programs." For these women, the prison offered a respite from the streets. One of the positive aspects women reported as it relates to identity is the time incarceration afforded for self-reflection. Women saw this as an opportunity to think about their past mistakes and envision a different future. The ability to engage in self-reflection is tied to one's self-perception. However, as discussed earlier, the lack of resources available to women placed limitations in acting on their visions for the future.

## Discussion

This exploratory study represents a starting point for understanding the ways women experience prison in the Caribbean. As previously discussed, while the experiences of women in prisons in the U.S. is becoming a burgeoning field, little is known about the experiences of women in prisons within foreign countries, particularly developing countries.

**Women and Social Identity Pre-Incarceration:** With a couple of exceptions, our results mainly support the limited prior empirical studies that have explored how females do time. Women who are incarcerated face challenges to parts of their identities that have grown accustomed to the social environment before their incarceration and face circumstances, such as a penal culture and limited resources, in prison that have the potential to reshape their identities in fundamental ways. As previously discussed, motherhood and connection to family and friends are an integral part of who women are in society. Our findings indicate that one of the most stressful conditions of incarceration for the women in this study was the separation from their children and the anguish over the lack of contact with family members and friends with whom many of these women had lost touch. Moreover, research conducted in recent years has repeatedly documented that the inability to maintain contact with children is a significant stressor followed by the inability to maintain contact with family members Belknap [1], Lopez Garza [6], Luke [37], Pollock [3], Travis [38]. The foreign nationals in this study bore the brunt of this detachment from children, family, and friends given the geographic separation from their homelands. This separation represents a major loss of the interactions that naturally reinforce the social identity of women. Consequently, women may experience stress in these situations and look to alternative forms of interaction to cope with the stress of separation. As noted in previous research and current findings, in order to cope with the agony of separation, open same-sex relationships and the emergence of “jail-sisters, or jail-mothers and jail-daughters” surfaced Belknap [1], Bloom [39], Collica [22], Fletcher et al. [2], Giallombardo [23], Pollock [3]. However, other women turned to a solitary existence that was largely confined to their cells as a method of coping with their loss and the oftentimes negative, hostile prison environment. While women talked a great deal about the challenges of maintaining who they were as mothers and members of families and friendship networks, the study also revealed the dynamics of how the culture of the prison system influenced their identity.

### The Prison Culture and Challenges to Women’s Identity

As the women in this study considered the prospect of being released from prison, they began to reflect upon past traumas, expressing grief about dim prospects for the future. As outlined by Lopez Garza [6], the women thought about unification and providing for their children, having little to no financial resources or a place to live, and the families who had abandoned them. Women in the study also noted the lack of prison programs designed to prepare

them for release. The anxiety these women expressed is a reflection of the penal culture in the Caribbean Sumter et al. [28,29]. In this culture, the idea of providing much needed resources to inmates has not been fully integrated into the penal system. This creates not only stress for women, but reduces their sense of self-efficacy. Also, similar to prior scholarship, our findings revealed that the women continued to be stigmatized and marginalized in the prison setting. The stigmatization and hostility the women described involved the actions of other inmates, as well as prison officers. Specifically, women in this study noted that they were constantly reminded of their status as criminals, even those who had not yet faced trial. In addition, the women also experienced many of the forms of deprivation outlined by Sykes [14], such as, deprivation of liberty, autonomy, goods and services, and heterosexual relations. Finally, unlike prior research conducted in the U.S., the women in this study strongly emphasized that judicial and penal reform have the time served on remand count towards the sentence received from the court, if they are convicted. However, similar to women serving time in the U.S., the women expressed a desire for a speedier trial and a change in the sentencing structure for offenses such as murder. Moreover, the women sentenced for capital offenses noted that they had changed after a long period of incarceration, participation in programs and services for self-improvement, and periods of self-introspection. As a result, these women argued that a parole system should be implemented in order to provide them with the possibility of being released from prison. This is important to note, for as previously discussed, one of the factors associated with the prisonization of inmates is the time spent in prison. The more time women are exposed to the prison environment, the more likely they are to become absorbed in the culture. This makes reintegration into society more challenging once they have been released. Social identity plays a significant role in the lives of women who are incarcerated. Not only do they face losing sustained interaction with children, family members, and friends, entities which shaped their identity over the life course, but they also face a penal culture that has the potential to reshape how they think about themselves.

In addition, social identity can play an important role in preparing women for successful reintegration into the community and reduce the probability of re-offending. When women do not have the opportunity to cultivate a positive self-identity, a return to previous criminal activities becomes easier Geiger & Fischer [40]. A woman’s innate ability to mother and nurture as the caregiver of her family is grossly affected by being stigmatized and ostracized by previous criminality. The women in this study identified a number of challenges, which, at heart, are associated with social identity in some way. Given that more than half of female offenders in prisons are likely to be recidivists, providing programs that address these social identity challenges would be warranted Wilson & Anderson [41]. While education, vocational and job skills training, and therapeutic interventions may be necessary, in and of themselves, these initiatives are not sufficient to help women successfully transition into society and become productive



law-abiding citizens. Further, the incorporation of rehabilitative modalities that emphasize maintaining the positive social identities women entered prison with are also needed. Thus, programs that facilitate contact with children, family, and friends are of the utmost importance. In addition, one cannot dismiss aspects of the penal culture that not only stigmatize and marginalize women, but also reduce their sense of self-efficacy. As noted earlier, prison systems in developing countries often lack the resources and the cultural will to provide incarcerated women with much needed resources. Addressing this issue will require adopting policies and programs that are designed to not only target the individual inmate, but also the penal system in general. While this study was carried out in the Caribbean, it is interesting to note that many of the issues recounted by the women are similar to the issues women face in U.S. prisons. This observation may be a reflection of the extent to which life in prison reflects the nature of prison as a total institution. Thus, the experiences of women in prisons across borders have fundamental similarities. However, it is also true that the culture of the penal system in the Caribbean, as well as the limited resources dedicated to programs and services for inmates may exacerbate the challenges women face in prison. Given the limited amount of research that explores the experiences of incarcerated women in the Caribbean, we suggest that more detailed research is needed that examines the unique qualities of Caribbean prisons and how these qualities shape the experiences of women. While this exploration allowed incarcerated females in the Caribbean the opportunity to vocalize their experiences of living in prison, there are limitations in the current research. First, this sample of female offenders may not reflect the general demographics of females in other Caribbean countries or around the globe. As such, these findings restrict reliable conclusions that can be drawn about female offenders, as well as hinders the generalizability of the findings to females in other prisons throughout the Caribbean and around the globe. Second, the current research does not provide a comparison between the experiences of domestic and foreign nationals. Specifically, while the current study illuminates the prison experiences of female offenders incarcerated in the Caribbean, this study does not address potential similarities and differences with the prison experiences of female offenders incarcerated in the United States.

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DOI: [10.32474/SJPBS.2018.01.000114](https://doi.org/10.32474/SJPBS.2018.01.000114)



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