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**Experiences of Women
Participating in Private Family
Visits
at Federal Correctional
Institutions**

by

Andréa Riesch Toepell, Ph.D.

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Coordinated by Gail McCarthy, Project Manager, Family Violence Initiative.**

University College • Room 101 • London, Ontario • Canada • N6A 3K7
Telephone: (519) 661-4040 • Fax: (519) 661-3491

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EVALUATION OF INTERVENTION STRATEGIES RESEARCH COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Lesley Harman, Committee Chair
Evaluation of Intervention Strategies Committee
Department of Sociology
King's College, University of Western Ontario

Lorraine Greaves, Centre Director
Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children

Jean Bernard, Executive Director
Changing Ways

Terry Boyd, Chair, General Studies Division
Fanshawe College

Albert Cota, Psychologist
Correctional Service of Canada
Western Ontario District Office

Lori Cunningham, Director
John Howard Society of London

Bob Gough, Residence Housing Manager
University of Western Ontario

Olena Hankivsky, Research Associate
Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children

Roma Harris, Acting Dean
Graduate School of Library and Information Science
University of Western Ontario

Gail Hutchinson, Director
Student Development Centre
University of Western Ontario

John Mediema, Group Counsellor
Changing Ways

Cecilia Preyra, Counsellor
Student Development Centre
University of Western Ontario

ABSTRACT

Thirty-five women from Ontario whose partners are incarcerated in Canadian federal prisons were interviewed about a Private Family Visit (PFV) Program administered by Correctional Service of Canada. Specifically, the women were asked if they had any personal safety concerns arising from the program or the way it is administered. Although some women said they had experienced physical, emotional and verbal abuse with past and current partners prior to incarceration, only one woman admitted to experiencing abuse during a private family visit. The sample group's rate of woman and child abuse during these visits is far below that experienced in the general population, leading the researcher to question why these women were reluctant to talk about "bad" PFV experiences. In their own words, the women describe their distrust of Correctional Service of Canada personnel, their fear of losing contact with their partner, their feelings of isolation and marginalization and how the Private Family Visit Program could be made safer.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During early 1995, 35 women with an incarcerated partner were individually interviewed to assess their experiences with the Private Family Visit (PFV) Program offered by Correctional Service of Canada (CSC), and to ask about any abuse experienced during visits. Their stories are crucial to developing an understanding of the quality of the experience of participating in Private Family Visits under the auspices of CSC.

PFVs or trailer visits offer complete privacy and isolation, a situation which can put women and children at risk if spent with an abusive partner. The study attempted to determine whether women experience abuse in PFVs, what factors are associated with these experiences, and what suggestions the women had for making such visits safer for women and families.

Women were recruited with the assistance of Bridge House I in Kingston, various John Howard Societies in Ontario and via word of mouth from within the community of women with an incarcerated partner. Half of the interviews were conducted in Kingston, the remaining half in other centres in southern Ontario. While this was a very difficult population to attract to a research study, eventually a total of 35 women came forward to be interviewed. The research goals were expanded as the study was underway to reflect the significant amount of material from the women regarding abuse from CSC system and staff.

The most significant finding (and a limitation to the study) is that women experiencing abuse in a trailer visit either did not participate in the study, or disclose any abuse when interviewed. Either such women refused to participate or they were unaware of the study. Only one of the 35 women interviewed reported an abusive trailer visit. As the reported rate of abuse in this sample is well

under the level expected in a general population of women (10-50%), questions are raised about the inability or unwillingness of this population of women to disclose abuse.

The most significant deterrent to disclosure is that evidence of woman abuse occurring in a PFV will result in the termination of contact with the partner. Given this, some of the women interviewed may have been reluctant or cautious about disclosure.

Also, women generally identified a limited set of behaviours as “abuse” — they did not readily identify control, intimidation, threats or manipulation as “abuse”. Further, the notion of “emotional abuse” was more commonly termed as “mind games”. The definition of abuse most readily understood included physical or sexual abuse.

The characteristics of incarceration which affect families include living in isolation without a support network and marginalization by virtue of their relationship with a prisoner. They distrust agencies of authority, assume a significant financial burden related to maintaining contact, and fear disclosing abuse as it will bring unwelcome attention and threaten the contact they have with their partner.

Women also experience various forms of power and control used by their partner. This may be an expression of abuse previously expressed in physical forms but due to the external constraints of imprisonment is now expressed in more subtle forms of control and emotional abuse. Women are asked to provide continuous reassurance of their fidelity and commitment to the relationship, and to manage their partner’s case and actively advocate on his behalf. The majority of women put their lives “on hold” in order to help their partner through his incarceration.

A few women had had abusive relationships with their partners prior to incarceration, but many more had experienced abusive relationships with previous partners. All of the women spoke of a strong distrust of CSC and declined to discuss their personal safety concerns. They feared reprisal from their partner (possibly in the form of further abuse), and CSC (denial of visits) should woman abuse be documented or evidence of it found. This distrust creates tension as CSC is trying to reach its goals of safety for families while maintaining its security procedures and policies.

Although the majority of women in this study denied an abusive relationship with their incarcerated partner, the circumstances and situations of these women closely parallel those of women in the general population involved in abusive relationships. Such characteristics of isolation, marginalization, lack of social support, and dealing with a dependent, emotionally controlling partner are but a few of these features. The potential barriers to disclosing abuse and to seeking assistance and support, either inside or outside CSC, are explored in this report.

It seems clear that women attached as partners to incarcerated men have unique qualities, and live in unique circumstances, that make it difficult to know exactly how to access and serve them, and what exactly their needs are. Not only do these circumstances create barriers to

disclosing abuse, but, more generally, they create barriers to accessing general social support, assistance and advice from institutions, agencies and their support networks.

“Community Assessments” (CAs) conducted in an attempt to determine a family’s risk to violence prior to approving a PFV, may inhibit disclosure of abuse as all such reports are accessible to inmates under the Freedom of Information Act. Even when conducted by an outside agency, CAs do not facilitate a woman to disclose abuse, because it is CSC policy that she will lose access to a PFV and, in addition, that the inmate has access to her CA report. These practices and policies create a complex situation for the abused woman, her partner, CSC and the community agencies serving these individuals. Resolving these complexities must begin. This report is deemed a first step in opening up dialogue and analysis of the PFV system, particularly from the point of view of ensuring safety and reducing risk.



Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Woman Abuse and Private Family Visits

The Correctional Service of Canada is concerned about the incidence of abuse and violence occurring during trailer visits. Although CSC has strategies in place which are intended to assist staff in recognizing family abuse or violence and to respond appropriately, it is suspected that abuse against some women (and perhaps children) nevertheless occurs during such visits. Given that 52% of the federal offender population has probably committed some form of violence against their female partner,¹ and that 4,500 trailer visits are granted per annum, CSC perceives there is a considerable likelihood of abuse or violence occurring during visits. This, of course, does not preclude inmates charged with non-violent offenses from being abusive or controlling during trailer visits.

CSC is very concerned about women going on trailer visits who are unaware of the inmate's criminal history, who may be naive to his abusive or aggressive nature, or who are not convinced of the inmate's dangerous personality because they have never witnessed such traits. The latter concern speaks mostly to women who met their partner during his incarceration and do not know what he is like elsewhere. This unfamiliarity with his pre-prison personality and character is worrisome to most people working in the area of corrections. Often, CSC staff feel it may be difficult to prevent women in potentially abusive relationships from participating in the PFV program because they (and their incarcerated spouse) are entitled to request visits. As women and their partners typically do not trust the correctional system, concerns expressed by CSC may not be regarded as valid by the couple.

Methodology

The goal of the study was to speak with women who have had PFVs. Interviews were conducted to explore women's insights concerning trailer visits, the safety of such visits, their experiences concerning safety, and suggestions they might have for improving safety in trailer visits and the program in general. Ultimately, women's voices and stories were being sought and collected.

Women were not required to have a history of abuse and/or violence with their partner in order to participate. The single criterion used to include women in the study was that they had experienced at least one Private Family Visit, although four women were interviewed who had not yet had a trailer visit. Of these four participants, one woman was about to have her first trailer visit after the interview, and the other three women had applied for such visits and were not yet approved for the program at the time of the interview. A total of 35 women participated in the study.

¹ Dutton, D. G. and Hart, S.D. (1992). "Risk Factors for Family Violence in a Federally Incarcerated Populations," International Journal of Law and Psychiatry, 15, 101-112.

During the process of soliciting participants, the women were told that the interview focussed on their experiences with the PFV program and CSC, that suggestions and recommendations for improving the program were being sought, and samples of questions were provided.

Several strategies were used to canvass women to participate. Care was given to approach women in a non-threatening and safe manner. Women were asked to participate with the assistance of the following agencies and services: Bridge House I, various John Howard Societies, and the transportation service to institutions offered to visiting women and families. Participants were also secured by word of mouth among the community of women who have a partner in prison.

The interview length ranged from one and one-half to three hours, depending on how much a woman had to say about Private Family Visits and/or their experiences with CSC. All women were interviewed individually by the same researcher. Women were given a letter of information (informed consent) to read and sign, which was also signed by the researcher as a guarantee of confidentiality. A survey-questionnaire was used as a guide during the interview.

Additional interviews were conducted with individuals with a background working in the area of inmates, their partners/families and corrections. Interviews were held with members of the Correctional Service of Canada and John Howard Society, researchers and counsellors. They were asked for their insight concerning some of the themes and issues which repeatedly emerged during the interviews with women. The perspectives from these individuals are included throughout this report while discussing the study's findings.

Difficulties in Recruiting Women Participants

The study hoped to interview women of a particular sample: women who had an abusive relationship with their partner prior to the incarceration or who had experienced abuse or violence at any time during a trailer visit. However, only one woman disclosed experiencing an unsafe visit. A few women described having had an abusive relationship with their partner prior to his incarceration, but denied abuse during a visit.

It proved very difficult to recruit women with an abusive history with their partner. Some possible reasons may be:

- lack of contact with women (making the study known to them) who do not access social service agencies but who live in the community;
- lack of trust felt by women (women believed that CSC would be informed about participants and what they disclosed);
- suspicion that information from the interview would be noted in partner's file;

- fear of reprisal from partner ;
- fear of reprisal from CSC;
- fear that their partner would disapprove if they participated in the study;
- fear that they would be required to disclose certain things (such as experiencing abuse during PFVs, smuggling contraband into the institutions);
- an unsafe approach used to access women: they felt threatened;
- lack of interest among the women; they may have felt they did not want to give back to the system (CSC) which took from them;
- a preference to wait until someone else they knew completed the interview;
- reluctance to commit to an interview of more than an hour in length;
- reports of unpleasant things about the interview relayed from someone else.

Opportunities

The women who agreed to an interview did so for a variety of reasons. Although women were not specifically asked their reason(s) for participating, many voiced their willingness to provide their insight for the benefit of the PFV program and other women and families who visit.

Some women took the opportunity to voice how wonderful and successful their visits are with their partner. The difference between this and the fear of reprisal is that these women felt that there was a possibility that their partner had something to gain (as opposed to something to lose) from her participation.

A Description of the Women

The average age of the 35 interviewed women was 34 years. The range of ages was from 25-56 years, with the largest age cluster at 27-32 years. On average, women had a Grade 12 education. There were 27 women who were unemployed and receiving social assistance, usually family benefits. Of the eight employed women, four completed post-secondary education and were working in a professional capacity.

There were 20 women who identified how long they had known their partner, and the range for this was between two and 18 years. The average length of time these women had known their

partner was seven years. 27 women have children, 11 of these women have a child(ren) fathered by the partner they are visiting. On average, women have two children, not necessarily fathered by the partner. Four women have children from previous relationship(s) and have one or two child(ren) fathered by their current incarcerated partner.

Half of the 22 women who volunteered information about their partner's sentence said it was 10 years or less (ranging from one and one-half to nine years), while the other half have partners serving a sentence of more than 10 years (ranging from 13-25 years). Only five per cent² of the entire Canadian prison population is serving a sentence of 10 years or more.

Discussion

The most significant features of this study are that it explored a very sensitive subject, involved a unique population, and was not successful in recruiting women who disclosed experiencing abuse in a trailer visit. In any community the topic of abuse and violence is often private, which may explain why women did not speak about their experiences with abuse. However, it must be understood that speaking to women partners of inmates about many issues can prove difficult.

A tremendous sense of mistrust and fear is felt by women and men whose lives have been affected by imprisonment. It is expected that these feelings surfaced when women were made aware of the study and asked to participate. To explain, very briefly — feelings of mistrust and fear of the correctional system are rooted in the past experiences men and women have had with CSC. In prison, the general attitude (and one by which to survive) is to “keep to yourself” and not share any information or befriend others, and above all, “trust no one”. Women adopt these attitudes not only under the instruction of their partner, but through their own experiences with the correctional system and other women who visit a loved one in prison. The climate of fear and the climate of CSC clearly affected women's sense of safety concerning their participation in the study.

² Gail McCarthy, personal correspondence, 1995.

Chapter 2

PRIVATE FAMILY VISITS

Description of the PFV Program

Depending on the security level of an institution, trailer visits are held in either cottage-like trailers or small two-storey houses. The trailers/houses are individually encircled with a chain-link fence, depending, again, on the institution's level of security. PFVs are 72 hours in length and invariably the actual visiting time is several hours shorter because of security checks when women or families enter and leave the prison. A telephone in the trailer is connected to the keeper's or guard tower's office for communication and is mostly used to call inmates when "count" is on. Count is a security check when inmates are requested to step out of the trailer in order for correctional officers to see them, three or four times daily. Private family visits are typically scheduled every two to four months, depending on the institution and the number of inmates in the program. Socializing among couples or families during a trailer visit is not encouraged.

According to the women interviewed, trailer visits are wonderful and positive experiences. Three days together in private with their partner offer them the opportunities to be "normal", close to each other, to talk in depth about issues, do things together, cuddle, cry — to still be together when they awake the following day. Although most women had complaints about the program and provided suggestions and recommendations for improving it, none would reject the private family visit program. Women also spoke of the benefits of having trailer visits and the impact they have on keeping their relationship/family together.

The time spent together is very private, which is what most couples are seeking. However, as valuable as trailer visits are, they are also isolating which can place a woman and/or her children in a vulnerable situation. The majority of women admitted to feeling isolated and vulnerable during the first few such visits, but then spoke of how these feelings subsided with future visits.

Approval Process for PFVs

An inmate interested in having trailer visits must complete an application listing the names of the person(s) he wishes to visit with privately. Those listed (usually a girlfriend, wife, children) must acknowledge agreement with the request and sign the application as well. A "community assessment" (CA) is carried out either by CSC or a social agency (such as selected John Howard Society branch or the Salvation Army) or parole officers. Under contract with CSC, these agencies determine, among other things, whether such a visit would be "safe" for the woman and/or her children and if a PFV is recommended. The contracts with social service agencies are called "community assessment/parole" (CAP).

The screening process is currently the only strategy in place for assessing possible risks facing a woman when she is isolated with her partner for three days. However, this strategy is not

consistently implemented nor carried out and not all women are given a community assessment prior to their first PFV.

Limitations of the Community Assessment Process

If a Case Management Officer (CMO) has evidence that a woman's and/or her children's safety might be at risk, the trailer visits can be denied completely. More likely, however, is the recommendation that the inmate first participate in certain programs offered in the institution (anger management, family violence, drug use, sexual abuse/assault, etc.), after which he would be reassessed for a trailer visit. This process is very dependent on the views of the individual CMO, the behaviour history of the inmate during his incarceration, the nature of the offense(s), the evidence of abuse or violence in his history, and the institution involved.

John Howard Society branches are periodically required to conduct a community assessment but are not always given adequate information (e.g., psychological reports concerning the offense or history of offenses) from the inmate's file. This process can create difficulties, as the branch can then only complete the assessment based on the information gathered from the woman who wishes to visit the inmate (and who may not be honest about her information for fear of not being recommended for a PFV), and from the incomplete information provided by CSC.

The community assessment report from the CAPs contract or Parole Officers may be made available to the inmate under the Freedom of Information Act. There is danger in allowing the inmate to read this report as it could contain information from the woman describing abuse and/or intimidation by her partner, which could ultimately create additional reprisal and a less safe situation for her.

Limitations of CSC

It would be helpful to CSC in determining which women and children are potentially at risk for abuse and violence during a trailer visit if inmates' files reflected their history of woman abuse — but they typically do not. There are serious problems in the ways in which offenses and histories are recorded in case files. A minimal number of records reveal a history of violence against women and children, yet after a review of all records by a CSC staff member, 30% had indicated such issues, and only 1% had a history of abuse/assault indicated by the court. Even CSC is unaware of which inmates come into the institution with a history of family violence and abuse, and there is no formal mechanism in place to assess the presence of abusive behaviour. This lack of information puts women and children at risk during trailer visits.

Although the correctional system may have limitations concerning the amount of information kept in case files concerning woman abuse, trailer visits have not been granted to women if their partner is suspected of being abusive or dangerous. For example, Angela³ described the delay she and her partner experienced when applying for a trailer visit. She met her partner in prison,

³ All the women's names have been changed.

and he is convicted of a “sex crime against a woman”. CSC explained to Angela that there was concern for her safety due to his criminal history. She decided that she wanted to marry her partner and a trailer visit was eventually granted. However, CSC insisted that the wedding and the entire trailer visit be chaperoned by family members for the full 72 hours. It appears that CSC either did not believe Angela was fully cognizant of any risk that she might have been facing with her partner, or that her partner gave CSC reason to believe he might be abusive or violent toward Angela. Obviously, in this case, selected staff at CSC were aware of the potential risks to Angela, denied the PFV program for as long as possible, and, it appears, with hesitation permitted a trailer visit. Some strategies appear to be available to CSC for delaying visits until CSC is confident that the woman and child(ren) are not at risk — unrelated to the inmate’s current behaviour in prison. However, it is uncertain as to how long delaying tactics can be used before CSC must grant a trailer visit if no overt cause for delay can be identified.

Abuse from CSC

Women described experiencing abuse from CSC on many levels and in various forms: how staff treat and speak to them; how they conduct security searches through personal items, including body searches for contraband; the inconsistency of how procedure and rules are implemented; and the high costs for food.

Staff’s Attitudes

Almost every woman interviewed spoke of the rude and humiliating way in which families are treated by staff. Women spoke of the hostile and degrading attitudes expressed, in particular, by staff working in Visitor and Correspondence (V and C). Several women have visited in more than one institution and were able to make comparisons of their V and C staff — V and C in only two institutions were identified as “OK”. Only a select few staff members at certain institutions were regarded as “decent” or “nice”. Women prefer to communicate with these particular individuals and always hope they are on duty when they come to visit. Personable staff, according to the women, are rare in the correctional system.

When I went for my first visit they told me that I wasn't on his list [for day visits]. And I said, “Wait a minute, I'm his fiancée, what do mean I'm not on his day list?” They had me in tears, they sent me over to [another institution]. They said, “You can't see him, you can't speak to him, you go over to [the other institution] now.” So off I went to [it], and then I get a call from a guard on the other side to go back to [the first institution]. So I had to go back over, just to find out that the man at the desk did not know what he was doing. They didn't tell me there was such a thing as a courtesy visit — that's when you're allowed to go in, one visit unapproved, your first visit. ... If it wasn't for Joe⁴ coming downstairs to check to see if I had arrived yet, he wouldn't of even known I was there, I would have left without no visit. [Sylvia]

⁴ All of the men’s names have been changed to Joe.

Women typically suffer unnecessary degradation and abuse, and these offensive attitudes are pervasive among staff. These attitudes are reported as rampant in the correctional system because intolerance for such attitudes is not endorsed by management and administration, and because they reflect a form of power and control. In fact, many staff members display hateful and often hostile attitudes toward inmates as well. It would appear that because inmates are criminals and their partners are “criminals' wives”, that women are treated with the same degradation. Professionals in the field, including members of CSC staff, corroborated the above —described treatment of women and widespread negative attitudes expressed by most staff.

Security Searches

Searching through personal items is a security necessity. The majority of women accept the need to conduct such searches, but question the often rough manner in which they and their personal items are handled.

They accused me of smuggling drugs in. So they wanted to do a strip search. No problem, I'll sign [the consent form]. The two women guards were there, and I thought [the male staff] was going to leave, but he didn't, and I don't agree with that at all. Before the strip search was finished I agreed to have a body cavity done and x-rays to prove to them that I had no drugs. And they said no because they didn't find anything. And then I found out that we don't get any trailer visits, they canceled our trailer visits, they canceled our visits. [Joanne]

Inconsistencies in Procedure

As described by the women interviewed, the most frustrating aspect of going for day and trailer visits is the inconsistency in implementing policy among staff members. Women do not have objections to restricting items from entering the trailers, but they are upset about apparent inconsistent application of rules. Almost all of the women suggested that a list of restricted items be prepared and given to visiting families and that staff abide by this list when doing security checks.

Costs for Visits

Finally, the high cost of food ordered for trailer visits is a concern for families, especially families on social assistance. Typically, the inmate orders the food and pays for it, but many women find the prices to be inflated and would rather see the extra money spent on food purchases for their family outside prison. As well, all leftover food must be thrown out before leaving a trailer visit. None of the women interviewed understood the reason for this policy, but all suggested that families be allowed to take home the food they paid for. It is unclear how the removal of food from a trailer could be considered a security risk.

Women's Experiences With the PFV Program

Most of the women described feeling safe when visiting with their partner in trailers. A few women exclaimed that being in the institution was the safest they have ever felt, or feel most safe there — “where could it be safer than in prison?” Rather, as substantiated by professionals working in the field, women are more fearful of their encounters with prison authorities than they

are of their partner. Many women, however, admitted to having felt uncomfortable during such visits in the past (usually during the first few trailer visits). Feelings of anxiety were generally attributed to being nervous because these visits represented the couple's first few times alone together since the incarceration. It may have been months since they were last intimate and able to enjoy private time together.

Other women who had met their partner during his incarceration were more tense and anxious about the first trailer visit, as this opportunity represented the first time they would be alone together. Reporting their feelings of discomfort or anxiety to the "authorities" is not likely, as they fear the system which repeatedly intimidates and humiliates them. Therein lies the essence of the paradox concerning the safety of women in PFVs: women will not disclose their fears or experiences of abuse to a system they do not trust, although CSC may be able to protect them from having an unsafe trailer visit.

Women are in a very difficult situation when they feel hesitant to visit on a PFV. It is almost always the men who initiate the approval process for trailer visits. In fact, they are often encouraged by CSC to do this. Men typically inquire immediately upon incarceration about the protocol involved for such visits, obtain the necessary forms, begin the paperwork and tell the woman to indicate her consent by signing the application. Should she feel resistant to a trailer visit, have qualms or uncertainties, or be afraid to be alone with her partner — there is no effectively safe mechanism available to her to refuse consent. She must sign the papers. If not, she risks:

- experiencing reprisal from her partner, which can manifest itself in threats or coercion, difficulties during day visits, or problems after his release — such as abuse;
- exposing her fear of him or his abuse, to CSC, which would then be noted in his files and could hinder him from gaining early parole or extra privileges — for which she would be blamed and likely receive his wrath;
- being blamed for being responsible for delaying the approval of the trailer visits (a detention sometimes used as a strategy to protect her);
- being blamed for being responsible for giving reason(s) to the CMO for requesting that the inmate first take various programs before a trailer visit can be granted; or
- losing three days with him (even at the risk of experiencing abuse), which would be more than what she has living in isolation without support outside prison.

Consequently, should the woman give any information concerning abuse, she faces losing trailer visit privileges and could risk experiencing reprisal from her partner. Therefore, not only will women refuse to disclose abuse or admit to fearing for their safety during a community assessment interview, they will not come forward if they experience abuse during a PFV. Sadly, and ironically, a procedure intended to ensure safety for women and children is at the root of jeopardizing their safety.

Experience of a “Bad” Trailer Visit

A “bad” trailer visit constitutes a visit during which the partner became violent, abusive, threatening or controlling, or the woman felt her safety was at risk. Only one woman described an unsafe trailer visit, after which she did not return and subsequently divorced her husband.

Most women had heard of one or two women who had had a “bad” trailer visit (“bad” in terms of safety, experiencing abuse). Even the women who keep to themselves and do not communicate regularly with other visiting partners had heard about bad visits. The descriptions of these particularly unsafe meetings included women who were beaten by their partner, some with and others without the presence of children, and were removed from the trailer before the three days were expired; a woman who left the trailer visit with visible bruises (which she did not have when entering the trailer); a woman being abused who telephoned the guard requesting to be released from the trailer and waited seven hours inside the trailer with her abusive partner before guards removed her; and overhearing couples arguing or throwing things in neighbouring trailers.

The women who volunteered to participate in the study significantly under-reported abuse in their relationships compared to the general population. Very few women divulged feeling uncomfortable about or obliged to attend a trailer visit, and only one woman disclosed actually feeling threatened in a trailer. However, as it is clear that women found it much easier to discuss other women’s abusive experiences than their own, it may be unreasonable and simply too high risk for women to disclose their own abuse prior to the incarceration or during PFVs.

Suggestions for Making Trailer Visits Safer

A few participants noted the underlying need to empower these women, but acknowledged the difficulty in successfully doing so in a safe, non-threatening manner. The following is a synopsis of women’s suggestions concerning making visits safer:

- provide women with an orientation prior to their first trailer visit; discuss safety issues and negotiate a safety plan with them;
- install panic buttons in several places throughout the trailer, in locations not easily accessible to children;
- give women a portable panic button on a key chain or necklace for her to keep on her person during the visit;

- include women and children, as well as men, in the "count" (i.e., to step out of the trailer and be seen by correctional officers);
- monitor the trailer visits (forms of surveillance), especially the visits involving men who exhibit violent behaviour or anger inside the institution;
- have correctional officers routinely visit each trailer, step into the trailer and visually assess whether the woman (and children) appear distressed;
- make telephone arrangements with the woman on the way to the trailer if she is concerned or feels uncertain about how the trailer visit will go with her partner (i.e., is concerned about her or her children's safety).

Interestingly, some women who experienced abuse (often extreme abuse) in previous/past relationships, but not in their current relationship thought that securing a woman's safety during a trailer visit was not insurmountable. One woman was surprised that the issue of "safety" should be of concern for women visiting their partner in a trailer. Others admitted that they never considered safety of women and children in trailers to be an issue, but understood the authenticity of such concern.

Approximately one-third of the women were unsympathetic toward the plight of women who experience abusive and oppressive relationships and visit with their partners in trailers. The most common sentiment expressed was: "She shouldn't go. She should leave him. Now's the time to do that, he's in prison, he can't touch her". Clearly, this sentiment reflects a lack of understanding of the complexities of why a woman might remain in an abusive relationship, or low comprehension of the limited options facing most abused women.

Leaving a Private Family Visit

Women reported that the most difficult aspect of a private family visit is when it ends, and they must leave the institution without their partner. For almost all the women interviewed, the end of the visit is very painful and many are despondent for several days thereafter. Also, men have a difficult time separating from their partners — going back to the institution and the prison life/culture from which they were removed for three days.

You cry. You cry. It is such a let down. It's like they're being ripped away from you yet again. All over again. When I left there, I cried the whole time. I came home and pigged out for days. For days. Just because I felt like Joe was ripped away from me yet again. And that is the worst feeling possible. [Joanne]

Rachel describes the trauma she suffered when leaving the first trailer visit she had with her husband. She had a difficult time adjusting to being in the institution for three days. Due to her

distressing experience, she refuses to have another trailer visit and, after two months following the PFV, she began visiting her husband on day visits only.

When I left [the trailer visit] I was torn apart. I was lost. ... I'm trying to swallow my tears, but they're just rolling down as I'm swallowing them. Joe was by the fence and he's crying and that makes it even worse for me. Then, my daughter's crying and that even makes everything worse. ... I was in a city that I didn't know. My head was going all over the place. I had my daughter with me. I felt like jumping over a bridge. I felt I couldn't take it no more. Then I'm leaving him there and I got to take the bus and come all the way back. I cried all the way back on the bus. I couldn't take it. I said to him, "Never again. Don't you never put in for one of these trailer visits again, because it was the most sickening thing in my life." Saturday [second day of the visit] I said, "I'm in jail too." It just hit me. I was there all Friday and then Saturday, I'm saying, "I'm in jail too. What's going on here?" ... I didn't want to stress him anymore because I know when I get upset, he gets upset. I didn't want to start anymore. Then Monday morning when we were leaving, I started packing from Sunday night, that's how upset I was. I got to go. It's like only two days we get to spend together.

Discussion

Perhaps the most significant point in this chapter of the report relates to the low rate of abuse reported during private family visits. The majority of women interviewed said that they had heard of one or two women who experienced abuse during a visit (hearsay); all but one woman denied personally experiencing abuse at a PFV. Social service agencies such as the John Howard Society indicated that their clients do not recount abuse nor have the agencies heard of women being abused in a trailer visit and other professionals in the field also deny an awareness of violence against women or children occurring in a trailer visit. The correctional system has a responsibility to secure the safety of families, and avoiding these incidents because the woman is afraid or wants to leave the institution is not an acceptable resolution.

Inmates and their families do not trust the correctional system, in fact, there is very little trust between the general public and CSC. This lack of trust plays a significant role when attempting to assist women who have an abusive relationship with their partner. Considering that women generally do not disclose their abusive histories in situations where resources and support are available outside prison (e.g., counselling professionals, women's groups, shelters) — why would a woman disclose abuse to CSC (a system perceived to be responsible for keeping her partner away from her and her family)? In addition, women partners of incarcerated men carry extra stigma and pressures and are generally harder to reach and serve in community agencies. It is of little wonder that women not only deny the presence of abuse, but lie about their fears concerning their safety in a trailer visit. Women have too much to lose (trailer visits), because too much is at stake (their only contact with their partner).

Should a woman refuse to participate in the PFV program because of fears for her safety, she is still at risk. Her partner would immediately be made aware of her decision (as the application information is shared with him) and she would experience the consequences. Continued contact

with her partner would be profoundly strained. Considering that for many women their partner inside prison is the only person they have in their lives, ending their relationship with him and being alone is often the last thing they want. In addition, as nurturers and caretakers, women go to great lengths to maintain their relationships — even enduring abuse. It may be that it is better to deny any acts or threats of violence and hope for nonabusive trailer visits, than risk losing complete contact with the partner.

The process of the community assessment does little to assess the threat of abuse happening during a trailer visit. Women may omit details during a CA in order to be approved for a trailer visit, and the assessments are subjective and presumptuous. CSC cannot blame the Private Family Visit program for abusive behaviour or for the further victimization of women, rather it should understand that the trailer visits become the forum. PFVs have a positive function and CSC is seen as destroying it. Suggestions for improvement, if CSC genuinely wishes to help women in abusive relationships, include keeping disclosed and documented information in the strictest of confidence (i.e., not share it with inmates), offering resources and referral services outside of CSC to women, and offering programs to inmates (such as the family violence program), and not threatening women with the potential denial of their right to have private visits with their partner.



Chapter 3

ABUSE BY PARTNER

Definitions of Abuse

The subject of abuse and threatening by the partner prior to incarceration was approached in a careful, sensitive manner. A few women spoke of physical, emotional and sexual abuse, but almost all women interviewed described controlling, manipulative, or coercive behaviours of their partners. Some women diminished the severity of abuse or the prevalence of particular types of abuse:

Nowhere in our relationship has he ever really been physical. The only thing he's ever done is one time he pushed me. I happened to hit my head on the window, but that is the whole extent of his abuse if you want to call it that in the physical sense. His was more mouth, like putting people down. [Bonnie]

Most of the women interviewed perceived abuse as either physical/sexual or emotional/verbal in nature. However, although they described examples of manipulation, criticism, control, and intimidation occurring in their relationships, they did not immediately recognize these behaviours as abusive. The women may limit the range of behaviours they identify as abuse because they: 1) are very isolated and do not generally have supportive networks in which to disclose and discuss the abuse they are experiencing; 2) are not linked with women's groups which can provide support and guidance concerning living with an abusive partner; 3) feel shame or embarrassment that their partner is abusing them and remain silent regardless of the support surrounding them; and 4) suffer from a double isolation when their abusive partner becomes incarcerated.

These women described situations wherein their partner still maintains control over them or manipulates them from prison. Control can be expressed in many ways, such as how often women are expected to alter their lives to suit their partners' needs, even to the point of compromising their personal safety. However, this behaviour was never acknowledged or identified as "controlling" by the women. The most prevalent and distinct patterns of control described relate to contact and communication, including excessive telephone calls and frequency of day visits. Often the enormous expenses incurred due to traveling for visits and telephone bills from collect long distance calls necessitated some women and their families to relocate and live closer to the institution holding their partner in an attempt to reduce the costs related to communication and contact. Further, many men are very controlling over their partners' lives through the use of the telephone.

Accepting collect telephone calls and making an effort to visit their partner does not on its own constitute being "controlled". However, for the majority of women, these means of communication enabled him to gain or maintain a sense of control over her. Further, an inmate typically expects the woman to accept collect calls (usually long distance) and to visit him as frequently as decided by him or permitted by the institution — despite the financial burden it

creates for the woman. The majority of women, especially those unemployed, have incurred large debts since the incarceration due to the frequent contact with their partner.

[Cost for visiting partner will] be about \$200 to \$250 for the weekend. ... [I only go] on trailer visits on weekends. That's the only time I can afford them. ... [Telephone bills] usually they're between \$130 and \$160 [per month]. If I wasn't paying the phone bill and if I wasn't paying to [travel to visit], I'd be saving about \$400 a month. I could have a down payment for a house in a year even. [Julia]

Clearly, women carry the financial burden associated with maintaining contact with their partner. It can be argued that inmates use the financial responsibilities as a way of controlling the woman. If she is forced to spend more money than she can afford in order to maintain contact with him, she is further entrenched in their relationship and is less likely to abandon him. A common sentiment expressed to women is, "If you really love me, you'll (visit as often as I want you to; accept my calls whenever I call) find a way to pay the bills."

Assuring Her Partner

Some interviewed women said their partners needed reassurance because they feel a loss of control because of their incarceration.

He's told me a number of times, "I don't want to lose you." I said, "Joe, if you were going to lose me, I would have been gone." He's very insecure right now because the tables are turned. He says, "Julia, you're in control now." I said, "Yeah, I'm in control of the situation, but I'm not having control. I'm not controlling, but I'm in control of the situation. If I wanted to leave you, I would have done it two years ago." I'm not the type of person to lead someone on and to humour people. I said, "Joe, why would I have waited three and a half years waiting for you when I've had ample opportunity to get out. I could go and you'd never see me again. You'd never find me. You wouldn't know where to start looking." [Julia]

In this quote, Julia assures her partner that although she has control, she will not use it to end her relationship with him. However, it can be argued that statements such as "I don't want to lose you" manipulate women into reassuring the partner of her commitment. Julia reminds her partner that she chose not to exercise the ultimate in control: to leave him behind in prison. Incarceration promotes the situation in which women feel a sense of nurturing their partner (perhaps for the first time), power in having the opportunity to make a difference in his life, and yet trapped (or locked) in the relationship.

Empowerment and Independence

A few women described making significant changes in their lives since the incarceration of their partner, such as returning to school to upgrade or earn a diploma, finding employment, securing finances to make payments, increasing self-awareness and self-confidence. Generally, women who experienced empowerment and increasing independence have a supportive network of friends or are well connected with supportive social agencies. A few women had the opportunity

to explore or discover these positive and satisfying areas in their life because their partner was incarcerated. For these women the oppressive force preventing them from developing their interests earlier or from growing a stronger sense of self-esteem has been removed. This change in circumstance might be viewed as "freedom".

Bonnie describes the independence she developed during and since her husband's incarceration. She also struggles with the difficulties in convincing him that she "needs" him, especially since she continues to maintain her independence after his return to the family.

When he was in prison, you become very independent. I had to do everything. I had to provide, I had to write cheques, everything you had to do if you were a single person, that's what I had to do. You made the decisions, you had to plan, you had to do everything. So now, one of his big things is, "You don't need me." Yes, I don't need him. I'm very self-sufficient. I handle things. What do I need him for? I'm thinking, "Well, there's got to be something." I said, "The companionship."

Exerting Control

In other cases, however, partners used the time in prison to exert additional control over women by pressuring them to stay home to accept collect calls. Women were asked what reaction they received from their partner if they were not home waiting for his calls. Typically, men questioned the woman's whereabouts and some made attempts to "track her down" by phoning her friends or relatives in an effort to locate her.

Sometimes he got kind of ugly, "You should be there for me. You knew I was calling." But there were times when they don't get the phone exactly when they're supposed to [in prison] ... There were times I sat there and waited and waited and waited for him to call and he wouldn't call. Well, the minute you go out the door, that's when he calls. So I said, "Hey, that's the way it is." He'd have to get over that. I couldn't help it. ... There were lots of times he'd ask me, "Over at your sister's again?" And I was. [Bonnie]

Almost all of the women interviewed described how their partner inquired where she had been when he tried telephoning her and she was not home (usually he asked in an angry and demanding tone). Many women spoke of how their partner exhibited this behaviour at the beginning of his incarceration and that it had lessened since then. Most women attributed this behaviour to his way of trying to control her — and many women spoke of how they had to "set him straight", that is, make it clear that he could not control her by demanding that she stay at home to wait for his calls or questioning her whereabouts.

The majority of women said that it was easier for them to simply tell him everything there was to tell. These women felt that because their partner would inevitably ask for the information, she volunteered it. In this manner, several women argued that they have control over the situation, because they control how much information they give to their partner. Further, almost all women keep their partner informed regarding details in their lives.

I tell him [what she does] like just voluntarily. Like at the start we went through a little phase where he wanted to know where I was and how long I was there and who was there and how many drinks did I have if I was at a place where there was drinks being served. And I said, "Why are you asking me all these questions? Like I'll tell if I want you to know." But I guess he was still kind of feeling his way around to see. And I'm just not like that. I'll tell him, "Okay, well, I'm going here and I'll tell you about it when I get back." 'Cause I'm not doing anything wrong so why would I try to hide anything? I'm just sharing what I'm doing. [Evelyn]

It should also be stated that the majority of women are eager to receive phone calls from their partner. Women want to be assured that he is surviving safely in prison, and to hear about his day and new developments (if any). Given that many women live in total isolation with little or no support, it is understandable that collect calls from an institution are a lifeline to the one person they feel connected to.

Two other ways inmates may try to control their partner are to make them pregnant or to initiate the process for PFV approval without their agreement. Women may be rushed into having such visits which promote privacy, togetherness and intimacy for which they may not feel ready. This opportunity enables the inmates to hasten the process of "bringing things back to normal", and living together in the same way as prior to the incarceration.

All women who experienced abuse and/or control with their partner prior to the incarceration were fearful and ambivalent about visiting him in a trailer. All such women admitted to feeling obliged to visit their partner for the first few trailer visits and would have preferred a delay in setting the first trailer date.

The first couple of trailers weren't really that wonderful between us because there was still a lot of anxiety and tension. I couldn't understand what had happened [relating to his offense]. "How could you do this? How could you put people you say you love through this?." There was really a lot of anger. ... I didn't know what I was getting myself in for. I didn't know how he was going to react because there used to be times when he'd just have these bursts of anger, outbursts for what I thought was no reason. So, I think I was really afraid that that was going to happen again. [Julia]

Impact of PFVs on Relationship

All the women described the positive impact the Private Family Visit program has on their relationship with their partner. The majority spoke of the opportunities to be physically close with their partner, enjoy each other's company in private, and strengthen their relationship as the trailers afforded privacy to discuss personal or difficult matters.

I feel more close than ever ... more closeness, liked connected. Now I feel like I'm a Siamese twin to him. [Susanne]

I can't imagine what we'd do if we didn't have [PFVs]. I can't imagine. ... [They are] more than positive ... they're essential. [Josie]

Many women spoke of how the trailer visits helped them develop better communication skills with their partner. Given that they only have three days together to visit, women described feeling compelled to make the most of their time by targeting particular issues. Several women who attributed their partner's previous abusive behaviour to an involvement with drugs and/or alcohol said a PFV gave them a sense of confidence. Some women also stated that they spend less time arguing or belabouring issues with their partner than before the incarceration — a strategy they hope to keep using in their relationship after his release.

We communicated before but we found out that we weren't communicating in depth. We held our emotions in but through the visits we're opening our souls to each other. And it has built our relationship. Like, we thought we had a good relationship before, but it's built from there. Instead of this [hurting] my relationship, it's actually helping. [Tanya]

Other women spoke about the difficulties that trailer visits bring:

... don't get me wrong, I wouldn't want to give them up. It is a bit of normality on some level, and yet it's very restrictive on another because you're locked up for three days and ... so, it's sort of surreal on some level. It enhances the loneliness, having trailer visits. Because in between [visits] you remember those times when you were just together... And why can't it happen now? [Sophia]

Women who met their partner during his incarceration do not have previously established communication patterns. However, trailer visits still have a significant impact on the development of their relationship.

I think [PFVs] made it better because, like I said before, it's easier to talk to. All our problems that we might have at the beginning or the six months in between that we couldn't ever really get sorted out all the way, cause there's only so much you can write in a letter, so much you can say over the phone, so much you can say at the visit in the visiting room. Yet it all gets sorted out at a trailer. And every trailer is like a stress release. You get all your arguments out, everything's off your chest and out in the open. And for both of us it just makes it easier. So I think they're a godsend. [Sandra]

Discussion

Inmates frequently control their partners through a number of means. This finding should not be surprising, especially when considering that the prison environment strips inmates of any control they had prior to the incarceration. One woman gives insight as to why men feel they can or must control their partners who visit:

I think that probably [the] frustration in there, is [inmates'] powerlessness and I think that one of the reasons if men, and I've seen a lot of it, are manipulative and power-mongering with their wives, it's the one person they can do that with. They can't do it to anyone else. To anybody else.

They are powerless. They are in cages, with people sticking sticks in their cages and it is a perfect breeding ground for violent acting out. It engenders it. [Josie]

An inmate who needs continuous reassurance from his partner likely feels severed from his life outside prison, is uncertain about his future, and is frightened and lonely. Assurance can also be a reflection of an inmate's need to confirm that he still has a role in his family's life, no one else will fill (or has filled) his role, and that he has a place to go to when he is released. The assurance he receives from his partner may be what gives him encouragement that his prison sentence will come to an end. It can also be a form of manipulation. This does not negate the fact that many inmates genuinely do not have anyone else in their lives other than partner who is waiting for them outside prison. However, such statements can "play" on the emotions of women who have never felt needed by their partner in the past. The incarceration may, in fact, prompt him to voice his need for her for the first time. Independent of whether his declaration of his need is sincere, she finds herself coping with two new aspects to their relationship: 1) a responsibility to "be there" for him as no one else will or can be; and 2) a sense of power that only she can meet his needs and make a difference in his life.

Chapter 4

SUPPORT AND ISOLATION

Family and Friends

The majority of women receive absolutely no support from either their family or their partner's family. Many women receive support from only one individual from either her or his family, and some receive full support from either family. Very few women spoke of having support from both families.

Susanne, for example, has four children, her mother is deceased, and she is an only child. She lost the love and approval of her father since he became aware that her boyfriend is in prison:

He's 65 years old. The man's had heart problems, he's had cancer. He doesn't want nothing to do with me. It hurts. He used to call me his little princess. I love him dearly. He doesn't want nothing to do with me. Nothing.

Although Susanne tries to attribute her father's attitudes to his age and failing health, she mourns his lack of support. Her friends think she is "crazy" for having a boyfriend who is in prison.

Brenda lied to her family about the nature of her partner's offense in order not to lose their approval. Her partner's family, on the other hand, is fully aware of his offense as he has a lengthy criminal record:

They've supported me a lot through all this — I mean Joe's family. Well, they know what Joe's been up to all his life and what he's done and stuff. My family doesn't know that. My brother does but my parents don't. ... [They] think he's in there for driving offenses. [He is convicted of robbery].

Concerning her son: *He believes the same thing. ... We don't want him to know that Joe's in there for stealing to give him the idea that it's okay to do that, because it's not.*

Nature of the Offense

The type of crime committed by the partner also influences whether or not women will receive support from family, friends or their community. Although women were not directly asked to divulge their partner's offense, several women disclosed the nature of his crime. Women whose partner has committed a sexual offense against a daughter or granddaughter received the least amount of support from family and society (in all cases in this study, the girls were not fathered by the partner).

This particular crime creates the highest degree of shame and humiliation experienced by women partners. They are very reluctant to discuss or disclose the offense with friends, family or

strangers — sending women further into isolation. It is unknown how many of the women interviewed have a partner whose crime is sexual abuse against a child living with them. Only four women disclosed this particular offense during the interviews. It is interesting to note that each of these women received counseling and support from agencies such as their local John Howard Society or community health centre.

Marg's husband sexually abused two of their granddaughters. She received support from her local community health centre initially for her depressed mood and has since become an active volunteer with the centre. She describes how she started her supportive network at the centre:

A couple of years ago I got very, very depressed. Just after he went to jail, I'd sit and cry for no reason. And one day I was just sitting here bawling my head off, and I phoned the health centre, and I was talking to one of the nurse practitioners. She said, "Get over here." I went over and she talked to me for about an hour, then she took me upstairs to the counselor and I talked to her for an hour, and she told me that I had to be there on the Thursday for the social club. It's like, it was, "you be there", and I have been there every Thursday since.

Marg receives support from only one of her four children, but has friends who support her because they do not believe her husband committed the crime charged against him. It is her perception that she has found a supportive and non-judgmental network for herself.

Julia, on the other hand, had difficulty establishing a supportive network among other prisoners' partners due to the stigma attached to her partner's crime (sexual abuse of her daughter). A member from a support group she was attending broke her confidence:

I said to this woman one time, "Do these two people [new to the group] know why Joe is in?" She said, "Oh, I just told them." [I said,] "You don't tell people who I don't even know where my husband is or why. You definitely don't tell them why!"

Julia was also able to receive the support she needed from the John Howard Society. With the exception of one brother, she has no support from her family or her partner's family. Julia has intentionally not told her co-workers about her husband's offense, although they are aware of where he is and are supportive of her. She describes her experience with her friends:

Friends, it seems to me that a couple of friends that I've told, I thought they were really good friends. I told them what the charge was and it's like they want nothing to do with me. It really hurts me because these are people I've known for ten or fifteen years. ... Other ones are supportive and then there's a lot of people who don't know the reason [he is in prison].

The type of offense appears to have an impact on whether the woman will reach out for and successfully receive support.

Clearly, women who have an incarcerated partner are in need of support and understanding — but may not be able to access and receive it. The few women who have successfully obtained support from non-judgmental sources (friends, other prisoners' partners, social agencies) described a less isolated life than women who have not obtained such support. In addition, these particular women revealed a broader perspective on the issues of prisoners, women, abuse, and the correctional system when interviewed.

Women Finding Support

A combination of societal attitudes, shame, embarrassment, and a fear of reprisal prevent women from gaining access to services. Some women described finding support among a very small and select group of women who also visit a partner in prison. These relationships are established once a level of mutual trust exists, and women may have such relationships with only one or two others.

It appears that the women whose partners are serving a lengthy sentence (over 10 years) tend to become friendly with women in similar circumstances. Women who have partners serving less than five years tend not to develop relationships with other prisoners' partners and have fewer agents of support. Women partners of "lifers" (men serving a life sentence ranging from 10 years and beyond) tend to link up with each other. Women whose partner committed a sexual offense tend not to associate with any other women partners (as in prison, these offenders tend not to associate with other inmates, as they are disparaged).

Support Groups For Women

There was overwhelming consensus among those interviewed that a support group offered to women partners of prisoners would be a good idea. Almost all women said that they would attend such a support group if one were available in their city. Kelly explains some of the benefits of such a support group:

...even going to the Bridge House I found that was therapy in itself... not feeling like I was going through this all by myself. Like talking to people that their families had disowned them. Not that it made me feel better, but it made me feel like I'm not the only one. And the last thing you need to feel is that you're the only one that this is happening to. And why is it happening to me? ... there's more comfort and you can sympathize with each other and just be there for each other. And like some friendships build up because of it. And you have somebody to lean on, the days where you think you just can't make it anymore cause you [do] go through those days. I don't think I can make it anymore. I just want to give up. And then you have somebody there that's supporting you and saying "You can make it..." Because you can't phone up your partner and say "I need support today. I've had a really bad day." So [a support group] would be a great asset, a big asset.

Some women, such as Marg, are aware of the difficulty in connecting with appropriate resources:

There are a lot of women, and I know this because I have heard a lot of it [on the John Howard Society bus] who are coming back from a trailer visit and they don't know what has happened, really. "How am I going to handle it now that I'm back?" I built my own support group, but there are a lot of women out there, I know for a fact, who don't have anything to come back to.

Some women, however, did not feel completely comfortable with the idea of attending a support group. Fear of possible reprisal and breach of confidentiality were the most common concerns expressed. For example, when asked if she would attend a support group, Gwen responded:

I don't know. I don't think I could open up to people I know who are visiting a jail, especially in the same institution, because if you opened up and said something and they told their spouse and it got around the institution. Because some people are in there and the guys don't know why they are there, because if they did, there would be trouble.

Gwen's concern refers to a prisoner's charged offense. Men who have sexually assaulted children or women are generally despised by other inmates and often at risk of violent physical attacks. Therefore, women partners of prisoners convicted of such sexual crimes hesitate to disclose this information to other people linked with correctional facilities. This substantive concern further isolates a woman from accessing support and/or services related to partners of prisoners.

Other women said that they would rather "keep to themselves", and are not able to trust other women who visit inmates. The concern centres on not knowing the integrity of other women, and whether an association with these women will create problems in the future. Amelia expressed some insight as to why women might find a support group threatening, and suggested an alternative:

Some women aren't interested. They just have a hard time linking up with other women. They have a hard time with the whole fact that their partner is in prison, that having to go through all that with other women is hard. [A support group] is visible. They don't want to be seen. That's why I [think a] phone line would be great. I don't want anybody to see me in that institution. Women don't want anybody to link them up with this thing of jail, bad things and stuff like that. So they wouldn't want to go walking into a support group with everyone in the community knowing what it's all about. Anything that's discreet, then they don't mind. It's just that visible thing. The phone line would be great because they don't have to give their name, their number, or tell you where they are. If they're going through any problems, they can discuss it and get some help.

Three women suggested that supportive avenues be offered through the correctional system to assist the inmates' partners and families. As described by Josie:

What I would say is the kind of support needed, and I think this might be utilized more thoroughly, would be if there was a place ... a room that was open to us and kids, and a place where anonymously one could make complaints ... and suggestions ... that would be addressed

and listened to and looked at. There is no grievance procedure [in place]. ... [It should be done] outside of CSC. I think [a] Citizen's Advisory Committee, if it's going to exist, needs to be an advocacy group. ... why not [have] an outsider organization? Why is there such hesitancy and distrust about outside organizations? ... families and prisoners need advocates who will speak on their behalf. Who will not assume we are lying, not assume we are wrong, not assume we're misperceiving, not assume we're paranoid.

Discussion

Lack of support typically leads to isolation for most women. Women partners of inmates are sensitized to the stigma and disapproving attitudes of their family members, friends and society at large. A strong sense of intolerance is experienced by almost all women because their partner is incarcerated. As Sophia poignantly states:

I did not commit a crime. I love a man who did. I'm not about to commit one... I recognize that not only at the institutional level are we not respected, that we certainly are not respected in the community. Better I should be married to a banker who beats me up and wears a three-piece suit and tie [than be married to a prisoner who treats me with respect].

The general public expresses judgment and prejudice against prisoners because of ignorance. The public does not understand the complexities of why people commit crimes and become incarcerated, nor are they familiar with the adversity associated with prison life and the distress endured by the families. Most people are frightened by prisoners, penitentiaries, and the correctional system. As described by one person working in the field, women withdraw when they sense friction or condemnation from society or their circle of family and friends.

The circumstances and situations of women partners of prisoners present characteristics which parallel those of women in abusive relationships. Isolation, lack of social support, inability to trust other women or support systems, identification with their partner's needs, control by the partner, etc. are all factors which allow abuse to flourish in a relationship. This is not to say that all wives and girlfriends of prisoners are abused by their partners. Rather, the actuality of their situation, whether these women are abused by their partner or not, reflects the features presented by women abused and victimized by a partner who is not incarcerated. The risk for fostering abuse is significant, especially when the stress and devastation of incarceration are components of the relationship. Because there is no apparent help for them, women appear inclined to remain silent concerning their fears and abusive experiences, especially when their partner is incarcerated.

Chapter 5

A CASE STUDY: Helen's Story

This study hoped to reach women who have abusive histories with their partner, and/or women who have experienced an abusive or unsafe private family visit. Only one woman (Helen) disclosed being abused prior to the incarceration and experiencing risk of abuse during a visit, identified by her as a "bad" visit.

Helen's history, situation and circumstances have caused her to become deeply entrenched in a pattern of abuse. Women in her situation and circumstances are the most difficult to reach and serve. CSC and professionals working in the area are most concerned about the risks facing women, like Helen, in a trailer visit. She has not disclosed to anyone her abusive relationship, or her fear and reluctance to visit her partner on a trailer visit. When considering her risk for an unsafe visit, it is clear that Helen is "falling through the cracks" in the correctional system.

Helen is in her mid-30s, divorced, without children. She has completed part of Grade 11 and hopes to study key punching and word processing in the future. She is unemployed and receives social assistance.

Helen lives alone with her pets in complete isolation. She has no circle of friends, is not acquainted with her neighbours and has moved her household several times. She has lived in various cities across Southern and Northern Ontario, in order to be with her ex-husband (prior to and after his incarceration), to avoid unsupportive people who know of her abusive relationship with him or his incarcerations. She also once moved because she feared that her ex-husband's family would harm her when she divorced him.

Prior to and during his incarceration, Helen's ex-husband was extremely abusive to and controlling over her. She had 10 trailer visits with him. Her current boyfriend is also very abusive and controlling, and since meeting her he has also become incarcerated. She has not yet had trailer visits with her boyfriend. She describes the control she experienced and currently experiences in her relationships with men:

[Experienced control with both partners] pretty much 'cause I didn't notice. 'Cause my husband was the most controlling person I ever met. And when I met this other person [boyfriend] who was on the outside and I knew he did time before, I thought, well, I don't know what I thought. I guess I thought, well, maybe this guy's done time, he's not gonna wanna commit any crimes. [Maybe he'll] settle down a bit and everything. But he was very controlling, too.

She described experiencing control, intimidation, threats and verbal, emotional, mental, financial and sexual abuse from her ex-husband. Helen experiences similar abuses and oppressions from her boyfriend. While he is less financially and sexually abusive, he exhibits more confinement and control-related abuse. She must make her whereabouts known to her boyfriend and fears his

wrath if she is not home to accept his collect calls. She assures him that she is not seeing another man and that she will “wait for him.”

Helen has absolutely no support network nor does she access support services. She has experienced prejudice associated with being involved with a prisoner, and has very limited contact with the only person she is connected with: her partner.

I didn't have any friends in [name of city] 'cause I told them that I was married and he was in an institution and then nobody wanted nothing to do with me. ... I felt pretty badly. And if I did have some friends they wouldn't last for too long, maybe a couple of months. Probably cause their husband said, "Hey, stop seeing her," 'cause a lot of people think he'll [ex-husband] come out and kill you for some reason.

[I felt] deserted. Deserted. So I was pretty well deserted for three full years. And I would go see him but that would be once every three months [for PFVs].

Helen said everyone in the small town where she and her ex-husband lived was scared of him because of his violent temper. After three years of visiting him in prison, she stopped:

because I was scared that [things would get bad again at our] next trailer or whatever. If I can't have a decent trailer with him then there's no way I can live with him on the outside.

Helen does not receive support from her foster family (she had several in her youth), from her ex-husband's family when she was married to him, nor from her current boyfriend's family. In fact, she is blamed for her partners' abusive behaviours towards her and their criminal behaviour.

[Ex-husband's] mother was like him . . . And she would do anything that he said. [She wouldn't care] if he abused me and I told her she [has] no compassion. She'd say, "Well it's your fault." I think that's the way it is with some abusive families. They think that it's always the other person's fault.

When her ex-husband became incarcerated, Helen was not married to him. He coerced her into marrying him while in prison. She also felt uncomfortable being intimate with him during the first PFV they had together, and she did not become more comfortable being sexually active with him the more trailer visits they had.

Sex was different because it was at least a good year and a half [since we were last intimate]. And I couldn't stand him really close to me. Like I could stand him hugging and kissing me. But I couldn't, I just kind of felt like — get away a bit. ... I felt smothered. He had to wait a couple of hours or half a day or whatever. He had to wait a while. I was very, I felt I was being smothered. I just couldn't 'cause I wasn't used to it or something.

When asked to describe what happened at the “bad” trailer visit, she explained:

He was taking medicine. They started giving him medicine when he was in there as soon as, actually it was my last trailer visit. ... He just got like since the first day he just threw all his medicine in the toilet, and he didn't take it. And I didn't know what to do. There was nothing much I could do. And then he was okay 'til about maybe 12 hours later and then he got — told me when to talk, when I couldn't talk. I said I wanted to leave. [He scared me because] he threatened me. He just threatened me. He just more or less said if [I] report a bad trailer or whatever then he'd send his family after me and give me a hard time or whatever. And none of them came up to the door or anything, the guards. ... None of them came up to the door. 'Cause they just called and [ex- husband] opened the door and waved.

[When he threatened and intimidated me] I just had to wait it out until it was time to leave. Cause there was no way to get out of there. If the man had come right to the door, the guard, then — but he's very quick and he's very strong. I don't know. I mean if it was two guards that maybe came up to the door, [if] one kind of got in then maybe I could get out.

Helen said she thought about picking up the telephone to call for help when:

he grabbed me back. ... [He put me in a chair and told me to] just sit there. ... [I experienced this before] when he was drinking [on the] outside. ... I just thought, well, if he's gonna be like that — when he's not drinking, like I don't know if something's wrong.

When asked if this particular trailer visit was the only one during which she felt uncomfortable, she explained:

Some of the other ones he just, he took his medicine and then the last day he would throw some of it out or something. Do you know what I mean? Just take it for half [the required time/amount] and I would notice a change. So when he threw all the medicine out I thought [I was going to be in trouble]. But when he took the medicine then he was okay and we had a good trailer. He was reasonable.

She was threatened by her husband that if she were to report the “bad” trailer, he would send someone or his family after her.

Given her past experiences and her boyfriend’s abusive behaviour, Helen said she would rather wait several months for a trailer visit. Her boyfriend wants to have trailer visits as soon as possible so they can get married and have children.

Well first he said that he wouldn't get a trailer visit for at least a year because of what he's in for. But then now he's saying we could get one in six months. So I don't know. [It makes me nervous] sort of, you know. A year from now sounds better for me. I mean sure I'd like a trailer visit if I know it's gonna, if it's gonna go okay, than fine. But you never know.

When asked what “signs” would indicate to her that the trailer visit would “go okay”, she replied:

You never know, you never know. 'Cause I can't tell, I can't tell. I don't think [other women] can tell either. I don't know, I've never, I don't know, I've never heard anybody say or admit they had a bad trailer.

Helen, however, believes that CSC will not approve a trailer visit if they sense that her boyfriend may be a danger to her. She is also confident that CSC will force him to take programs which will “straighten him out”. She had a community assessment done in another city when her ex-husband was incarcerated, but did not have a second one for the approval process for trailer visits with her current boyfriend.

Helen has made contact with a counselor in a community centre and is considering meeting with her to discuss her relationships. At the time of the interview, she did not have an appointment to see the counselor, but intended to make one.

I can see a counselor at the centre. But I'd like to go to a group, sit in and hear what other people say. So I'll be going to both [one-on-one and group].

... Because this is my second abusive relationship and when I moved here I could have gotten out of it. I could have not given him my address and made a clean break. That's what my doctor told me to do when I was moving. [But] I gave him the address — maybe 'cause I was scared [not] to. But I don't think he would have found out where I was. He didn't ask [for my address] but he would have.

Discussion

Clearly, Helen is in an abusive relationship with a very controlling man, a replication of her experience with her previous partner. She is concerned for her safety during trailer visits and she is at risk of experiencing further abuse in a PFV situation.

Perhaps the most striking comment made by Helen is that she wanted to leave an unsafe trailer, but felt she could not and, therefore, remained in the trailer. This incident raises several questions: Was a community assessment done? If so, could the assessment method determine a history of violence? Why was the case not identified as high risk for abuse during a visit?

It is understood that a CA which recommends approval for a PFV will not guarantee a family's safety or predict a nonviolent trailer visit. However, a safety plan (given for all women) could have enabled Helen to leave the abusive situation.

Perhaps Helen's reluctance to speak up, her compliance and acceptance of her partner's demands, and her living in isolation are the critical features which not only “typify” her as a

prisoner's partner living under his control, but also prevent her from trying to secure a safer environment for herself during a trailer visit.

Helen expressed doubt that a trailer visit could ever be made safe enough for a woman in an abusive relationship. The interviewer listed each suggestion that other women had made concerning safer PFVs (e.g., a panic button, telephone, correctional officers who periodically check on the woman during the visit), but Helen had an explanation as to why it would fail. Also, when she described not being able to leave the unsafe trailer visit, she referred to her ex-husband's strength. Likely she felt that no matter what safety precautions are taken, a strong man will always threaten the safety and/or life of a woman or child.

It appears that Helen does not assert her preferences to her partner, whether it is to postpone having trailer visits or getting married, which reinforces his control and manipulation over her. She has "put her life on hold" until he is released from prison. Other women's reasons for doing so relate to making themselves entirely available to their partner to nurture him and manage his case. However, Helen's circumstances suggest that her delay in getting on with her life may be related to wishing to remain in isolation until after his release. This would allow her to avoid disclosing his situation to anyone. Should this be the case, Helen is also serving a sentence with her boyfriend.

Chapter 6

CONCLUSIONS

The study assessed the experiences of women who have Private Family Visits with their incarcerated partner. All but one woman who participated in the study denied experiencing abuse during a visit. However, it was the perception (based on hearsay) of interviewed women that abuse sometimes does occur during trailer visits. Professionals working in the field were generally not aware of abuse occurring during visits, and speculated that its incidence is rare. The perception of CSC staff members, however, is that abuse does occur during visits. Their difficulty in confirming its occurrence lies in the fact they have no documented evidence or verbal confirmation from the abused women.

The acknowledgment of isolated cases of abuse, coupled with the hearsay and suspicions of violence, clearly establish that women and families are at risk during PFVs. Considering that these sources of testimony are the only forms of evidence to corroborate that abuse occurs during trailer visits it is essential that they be taken seriously. Women will/can not disclose abuse without considerable risk; therefore proactive measures must be taken to ensure safety in trailer visits and in disclosure of abuse to CSC staff.

Women who experience abuse during a trailer visit either did not participate in the study or did not disclose such abuse. It is concluded that these women felt a tremendous sense of risk associated with the interview, the primary one being that participation and/or disclosure would negatively impact their opportunities to visit with their partner.

Men who are in prison generally have very little control over their lives. However, the majority of these men appear to exercise various forms of control and manipulation over their partners, and have done so since before their incarceration. What is unknown is the degree to which men control or manipulate the women who did not participate in the study, and how this may have affected this study's findings.

CSC has made concerted efforts to address family violence and woman abuse in PFVs and has developed policy and training programs for staff. However, due to the inconsistencies found in implementing the policy and because levels of commitment concerning abuse differ in each institution, the need for a cohesive and solid position against violence in trailers is indicated. Efforts must be made to further develop and consistently implement effective strategies for screening and assessing risk during both the approval process and the private family visits.