

WOMEN WHO HAVE KILLED: THE PSYCHO-SOCIAL EFFECTS OF PRISON LIFE

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ABSTRACT

The female ex-prisoners interviewed in the semi-autobiographical collection *A tragedy of lives: Women in prison in Zimbabwe* (2003) caused the deaths of their own loved ones, consequently they were unable to mourn or bury them. The processing of the homicides precludes these women going through the appropriate rites and rituals which ordinarily form part of deaths in Zimbabwean cultural traditions. Various manifestations in the experiences of the different women interviewed, the complex psychiatric and psychological problems observed in these women are attributable to incomplete mourning and unresolved grief which are linked to the social inadequacies of a necessarily truncated expression of that grief. The present textual analysis is dually guided by African womanist and psychoanalytic theoretical frameworks. The study establishes a shift by Zimbabwean women writers from merely highlighting issues that affect women, to taking a stance on the effects of imprisonment on female offenders both during and after incarceration. Empathy and optimism are shown towards the interviewees. The semi-autobiography also enables the generality of Zimbabweans to understand the effects of such crimes and the need to rehabilitate offenders. The study encourages harmonious co-existence between males and females in the postcolony.

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INTRODUCTION

Dying and bereavement are basic and unavoidable aspects of the human condition that none can escape. The universality of death and bereavement, while inevitable, often sees the pain of the experience resulting in trauma and suffering, particularly where the cause of death is unnatural and was possibly perpetrated on a loved one or close acquaintance. From a largely Western perspective, as corporeal biological and embodied beings, humans are locked into an escapable sequence of birth, life and death as the cells wear out, core vital organs shut down and the biological body ceases to function (Barry 2011). From a general African perspective, death is thought of as a natural transition from the visible to the invisible spiritual ontology, where the spirit, as the essence of the person, is not destroyed but moves to live in the ancestral realm (Baloyi and Makobe-Rabothata 2014). Death in African societies, as is the case in Zimbabwe, is usually accompanied by certain mourning rituals that are mainly concerned with giving the deceased a socio-culturally appropriate send-off. However, shifting global trends have led to the truncation of rituals and practices, resulting in some interference with the mourning processes – especially through the commercialisation of funerals and colonial residues of non-indigenous religious practices. Therefore, traditional African ways of handling death are dying out in societies that have adopted Western practices. Women who have killed and are imprisoned miss out even on watered-down versions of the mourning rituals and rites that are normally practised to promote healing and closure for the bereaved.

CONCEPTUALISING MOURNING RITUALS AND PROCESSES

Theories of death in mainstream psychology are propounded in the West and are based on the social world in which they exist. Parham (2002) and Nobles (1986 and 2006, as cited in Baloyi and Makobe-Rabothata 2014) posit that a review of literature in mainstream psychology reveals abysmal ignorance and an absence of valid and relevant historical and cultural material, as well as the reality of what death means to African people. Death means different things to different African cultures, as it does in various Western societies. The general applicability of related theories thus cannot be accepted. The cultural implications and meanings of rituals performed after death often cause misunderstandings and conflict in cultures, or even at workplaces. Confirming this observation, Grills (as cited in Baloyi and Makobe-Rabothata 2014) reiterates that African philosophy and epistemology are not restricted to a specific

African ethno-cultural group; rather, it reflects a basic historical consciousness and a cultural unity that offers an understanding of things African. Death is consistent with African cultural, historical, epistemological and methodological conceptions of being-in-world, a natural transition from the visible to the invisible spiritual realm.

Swift (1989) notes a belief in a creator God known as Mwari, and in an afterlife in which the dead are thought to have a different (but continuing) existence within the spirit world, while remaining members of the extended family. This belief is at the core of the religion of the Shona, a large cultural grouping in Zimbabwe. Such spirits (*vadzimu* in Shona) are accorded much respect and are regarded as overseers of the moral behaviour and wellbeing of living members of the family. About the same culture, Bourdillon (1987) observes that traditionally death was considered unnatural and, in most cases, as requiring divination. Exceptions were made where the dead were elderly: their deaths were attributed to Mwari. Although the rituals are no longer strictly observed, death for the Shona is still marked by grieving and a deep sense of loss that is accompanied by concerns about the causal factors operating at a spiritual level. Illness and death are therefore concerns and remain the responsibility of the entire family, who must render material and psycho-social support to the bereaved. Relatives (especially women) may remain at the bereaved's home, alternating between keening, singing and dancing to traditional dirges and/or hymnals. The men may gather around a big fire outside the house, commiserating with one another over the loss. Therefore, in Shona culture grief and its attendant emotions and verbal sentiments are expressed in an open way – a rather different approach from Western practices where bereavement is a private experience.

Death is a psychological stressor that calls for the engagement of coping strategies and mechanisms in one's response and adaptation to the changed circumstances. Ordinarily, dealing with the loss of human life is a universal hardship for the bereaved and it is also a significant life transition to which those concerned must adjust. Different cultures tend to have social scripts made up of a core of understandings, spiritual beliefs, rituals, expectations and etiquette that guide the survivors' response to death as well as the mourning rituals aimed at facilitating adjustment for the bereaved (Parkes 1996; Setsiba 2012). Where traditional mourning rituals have been curtailed due to pandemics, an observable increase in psychiatric and psychological problems associated with incomplete mourning and unresolved grief has been linked to the social inadequacies of abridged mourning processes (Kilonzo and Hogan 1999). The relatives of the deceased are therefore generally able to find closure through such rituals, but not where one of them has caused the death, as is witnessed by the female inmates whose experiences are captured in the text *A tragedy of lives: Women in prison in Zimbabwe* (2003) (*hereafter A tragedy of lives*). The various women's experiences are underscored by deep regret, especially as the due process of the law precludes participation in communal mourning rituals designed to find closure. In this situation the women may be thought to be paying

a redemptive social debt, but their personal losses often have strong psycho-social effects on them (Nyamakai 2015).

A SYNOPSIS OF THE SEMI-AUTOBIOGRAPHY *A TRAGEDY OF LIVES*

This work is deemed semi-autobiographic, because it is a collection of first-hand stories based on exclusive interviews conducted by Zimbabwe Women Writers with former female prisoners, using pseudonyms (a characteristic of this genre). The interviewees are all women who have served sentences for homicide or abortion. The women's stories are highly personal, particular and provide information on the push factors that may have led them to commit homicide. The women's stay in prison is characterised by demeaning, punitive and verbally abusive interactions with the correctional system. Although they suffer many deprivations and face possible rejection by family and friends, their biggest worry is the welfare of their children, as they serve their time. Buttressed by scholarly contributions from law, gender and prison reform experts, the semi-autobiography underscores the need for society to create a safe space for the Zimbabwean ex-felons, and to reintegrate them into society once they have paid their debt.

A BRIEF NOTE ON THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The psycho-social effects of death on women who have killed are analysed through engaging the relevant tenets of Hudson-Weems' (1993) theory of Africana womanism, in conjunction with psychoanalytic theory, to uncover what is at the core of the psyche of women who have been imprisoned for killing their husbands, children or other close relatives. Africana womanism rejects the position of core feminism as well as that of patriarchy and emphasises the centrality of the family, community, genuine sisterhood and motherhood (ibid.). The theory therefore advocates a shared complementarity where both men and women struggle to survive in solidarity and accept each other as equal partners, with mutual benefits, and deserving equal treatment in society.

The women interviewed in *A tragedy of lives* are transformed by the harsh social, cultural and economic conditions they face daily. Most are from impoverished backgrounds and have to make a living in some way, but find their efforts thwarted or undermined by their partners or spouses. Without any kind of support, some have to take care of their grandchildren from irresponsible children. A key tenet of Africana womanism is that men and women cooperate with each other in their struggle to survive (Hudson-Weems 1993). This ideal is belied when men let women down and abuse them, thus breaking the inextricable link of their joint fate, with tragic consequences – especially for the women.

Buttressing Africana womanism, psychoanalytic literary theory is employed in this article to augment the researchers' understanding of the effects of death on women who have killed, through their self-portrayal in the semi-autobiography under study here. As is the nature of textual analysis, the final meaning of this text is hermeneutic but yields an empathetic understanding of how imprisonment may be that much harder on women. The present study does not attempt to analyse all the interviewees' stories; it only captures those considered most poignant by the researchers. Additionally, the analysis of the effects of imprisonment on women, as presented in Musengezi and Staunton (2003), is boosted by Charles Samupindi's rendition of Nehanda's imprisonment and death by hanging in *Death throes: The trial of Mbuya Nehanda* (1990). Although the latter work is male-authored and the two works are separated by over a century of history, with the causal effects of the deaths significantly different, the inclusion of the latter novel enables a balanced understanding of the effects of imprisonment on women who have killed.

WOMEN WHO HAVE KILLED

There are both legal and psycho-social impacts on women serving prison terms for all kinds of offences, but those who have killed suffer more, as can be expected, considering the gravity of their crimes. There were many other reasons why anyone would be imprisoned for murder in colonial Rhodesia, unlike the case of Nehanda who, as a territorial spirit medium, killed in defence of her own people and murdered those some may consider as invaders. For the present researchers, Nehanda's crime was an act of war and not a felonious act (unlike the women interviewed by Musengezi and Staunton 2003). The current economic instability in Zimbabwe is blamed for some crimes committed as individuals seek to survive the hard times. Women – particularly rural women – tend to be the worst victims of the economic meltdown and have to contend with abandonment by husbands, brothers and sons who migrate to cities or other countries in search of a better life for themselves and their families. Bearing the brunt of economic instability, they eke out a living in a society that has disempowered them by virtue of gender ascription and economic deprivation.

As noted by Stewart (2003), the majority of the interviewees come from impoverished backgrounds, have little education and are economically disadvantaged. Their crimes stem from this deprivation. The semi-autobiographical nature of the book presents lived experiences and real-life issues affecting the women as well as the consequences of some of their decisions, which are frequently arrived at impulsively (Nyamakai 2015). Nyamakai notes how some traditional beliefs and practices have impacted on the women's interpersonal relationships, with fatal consequences. Polygamy is one such relationship. Although no longer regarded as a family ideal, it may result in crimes of passion, despite Zimbabwe's legal system

embracing several different forms of marital union. Thus, the psycho-social effects of death on individual women who killed others are the chief concern in the present investigation.

PRISONS WITHIN PRISON

According to Abdullah (1996) the length of imprisonment and the conditions of the incarceration determine the level and/or degree of psychological damage the individual is likely to incur. For anyone (women in particular), prison is no place to be. The prisons in Zimbabwe were originally designed to hold male offenders which, in itself, presents numerous logistical problems for female inmates as the social 'other'. Mabel Chinyamurindi, an interviewee in the text *A tragedy of lives* and a former prison superintendent, confirms that no effort has been made to modify the design of female prisons because, compared to males, women represent a very small fraction of inmates and 'investing in a very small number of people (about 3.5%) against a big number is not normal practice' (Musengezi and Staunton 2003, 283). If this is the official position, it means the correctional system responds to women's needs and experiences within extremely retrogressive frameworks that represent male perspectives (Harden and Hill 1998). The prisons do not meet women's physiological and sanitary needs. Samakayi-Makarati (cited in Musengezi and Staunton 2003) confirms that menstrual requirements, for instance, are not provided for under prison legislation (Third Schedule of the Prisons: General Regulations 1996). Thus, a stint in a Zimbabwean prison is made ever more tortuous by the lack of adequate provision of the necessary facilities. The same state of affairs is captured in Samupindi's retrospective fictionalised account of Nehanda's arrest, trial and subsequent hanging in *Death throes*, a sorry event that occurred more than a hundred years earlier in the then Salisbury Prison. Nehanda and her three male co-accused are cramped in one cell where

the rain fell from the darkness above ... producing a mind-taunting prattle. This perpetuity was punctuated by the plip plop of heavy rain globules also falling onto the floor. The floor was wet and dank She was wet through to the bone. The rain dripped down on her nonchalantly It was dark. And the cold crept upon her like a thousand centipedes looking for crevices, orifices and dentures in which to hide. (Samupindi 1990, 22–23)

The deplorable prison conditions are therefore nothing new, but that the state of neglect has persisted into independent Zimbabwe is quite strange considering the state's emphasis on gender equality. Chikwanha (2013) further explains how only those prisoners classified as dangerous sleep in separate cells. Others have to share a two-by-four-metre square cell with two or three others, thus existing in a prison within the main prison. The absence of toilets in the cells presents serious health hazards to the inmates, as basic hygiene becomes impossible to maintain. Sanitation is compromised as the women are unable to remove waste to ensure their good

health. These women represent a significantly neglected population, detained in unhygienic facilities by regimes that operate to disempower them. Thus, the impact of imprisonment on women's physical health has been found to be negative in Zimbabwe, as elsewhere in the world (Chinyamurindi in Musengezi and Staunton 2003; Corea 1992). The Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment no. 20 of 2013, Article 246 (d), encourages the improvement of prison conditions through the Zimbabwe Gender Commission which (among other duties) is mandated to 'conduct research into issues relating to gender and social justice, and to recommend changes to laws and practices which lead to discrimination based on gender' (Constitution of Zimbabwe, 97).

Although pseudonyms are used in the interviews that form the basis of the semi-autobiography under study, the voices of the prisoners themselves are 'heard' and that authenticates their experiences of imprisonment. For example, the interviewees Maureen and Rhoda claim they have developed high blood pressure while incarcerated and attribute their declining health to the mental and emotional torture they suffer as they try to come to terms with their prolonged absence from their families. Yet both women dread the prospect of going back home and trying to reintegrate with families who might not want them back, given the crimes they committed. The women's crimes weigh heavily on them: certain women killed their own children, spouses or relatives. Another prisoner, Tabeth, who beat her daughter to death and consequently missed the burial, dreads the inevitable first sighting of her daughter's grave. The guards do not make life easy for her. Just as professionals may be referred to by their professional titles, prison guards may taunt prisoners by referring to them by the nature of their crimes. The guards say to her: 'Hey you, murderer. Come here' (Nyamakai 2015). Whether or not such mental torture is part of the punitive process, its efficacy is considered doubtful by the present researchers. There is evidence that a prisoner's family and friends may forget about them. Such rejection by one's own may be hard to bear since imprisonment cuts one off from society. The lack of familial support may open up such women to increased risks of depression and anxiety, leading to the development of mental illness (Villines 2013). However, it should be remembered that women who have killed go to prison because the state has to ensure

the protection of society from criminals through the incarceration and rehabilitation of convicted persons and others who are lawfully required to be detained, and their reintegration into society ... (*Prisons and Correctional Services* Chapter 11, Part 5, Article 227, p. 90)

These women are therefore paying their debt to society. The adage 'Don't do the crime if you can't do the time' (Anonymous) is an appropriate rejoinder to would-be killers.

The real-life experiences of female inmates, as captured in *A Tragedy of Lives*, reveal a great deal of poverty, suffering, hopelessness and despair. Women

are portrayed as vulnerable and prone to all forms of oppression, while battling to remain resolute and responsible (<http://www.herald.co.zw/a-tragedy-of-lives-and-the-nature-of-imprisonment/>). It can be argued that women remain psychologically imprisoned, as their actions are mostly driven by their female nature. For instance, motherhood may be considered a form of incarceration which women can never escape from. As women, burdensome, unrewarding and unrewarded gendered roles are thrust on them and sometimes their only recourse is to respond with violent outbursts. Many women are exploited as cheap labour in marriage, and cast aside for other women who are frequently entertained and feted with money they have earned (Musengezi and Staunton 2003). Women may be castigated for their childlessness or for bearing only daughters, yet infertility problems might lie with their male partners. Such women may be driven to engage in various ways of fulfilling their motherly role, for instance by conceiving outside of marriage. Such children may be reared by their husbands at the risk of losing face in public.

The desire to provide for one's family and fulfil the role of carer in the family leads some women, such as Jane in *A tragedy of lives*, to commit crimes usually associated with men, such as cattle rustling which carries a stiff prison term. Another interviewee, Maria, killed her husband out of frustration at his constant abuse. Upon imprisonment she requested to have her children placed with her, but only the youngest was allowed. The other children remained behind and this was a constant source of worry. Usually, upon their release, such women find their families disbanded and their homes in disarray. They thus have to re-start life with little material and moral support, which serves to confirm that they are indeed imprisoned by the state of motherhood.

THE PAINS OF IMPRISONMENT

For female inmates, 'the pains of imprisonment' revolve around family relations, particularly separation from their children and the loss of the self-defining maternal role (Stanton 1980). Most of the interviewees' offences arose from them being mothers, grandmothers, aunts and sisters (Mapfuwa 2007). These women are unable to shed their natural roles and are often concerned about the whereabouts and wellbeing of their children: Zimbabwean society tends to lack basic social safety nets and laws that are sensitive to children's needs (Feltoe 2015). Some women give birth in prison or bring in very young children who are thus unwittingly incarcerated. They are 'doomed to start life ... helping Mother do serious jail time' (Manyarara 2010). Maternal instincts are a push factor in the crime of abduction, as was committed by the interviewee Elizabeth, who stole a baby to please her husband in the belief that she was to blame for their childlessness (Musengezi and Staunton 2003). Social expectations and prejudice drove this woman to commit a crime. Ironically, she bore three children in a subsequent marriage.

Abortion is another reason why some women go to prison. Abortion remains illegal in Zimbabwe and can only be legally performed in cases of rape or any untenable circumstance. However, as argued by the Zimbabwe Women Lawyers Association, the state fails to protect the rights of women and unborn children by not affording rape survivors access to legal abortion (Three Men on a Boat, March 24, 2014). Zimbabwe still operates on *The Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1977* which allows abortion only if the life of the woman is endangered, the child may suffer permanent physical or mental defect, or the foetus is conceived as a result of rape or incest.

The statistics show that the number of illegal abortions is on the rise. An estimated 70 000 illegal abortions take place in Zimbabwe every year, and the data confirm a growing need for reproductive education (IRIN 2015). Mbanje (2015), who bases her figures on data from non-governmental organisations, sets the number at 80 000 illegal abortions that result in about 20 000 maternal deaths every year in Zimbabwe. Some women thus go to prison for having an abortion – an act that is not a crime in other countries, such as neighbouring South Africa. The pro-life stance is double-pronged, as a woman in prison cannot mourn the death of a child she never wanted. Her trauma of being imprisoned may thus not be as horrific or far-reaching in its effects as that of a woman who is incarcerated for infanticide.

Rule (1987) sets out the conditions that are likely to lead a woman to infanticide in Zimbabwe as fear of abandonment by her parents who will lose out on her bride price; the stigma of rape and rejection by her family; and pregnancy resulting from premarital sex or an illicit affair. Legally, in Zimbabwe infanticide within the first six months of a child's birth, although criminally prosecutable, takes account of the mother's state of mind, in itself an acknowledgement of the birth trauma some women suffer. Manslaughter calls for life imprisonment, but is often commuted to a non-custodial sentence subject to treatment or a hospital order. The woman's state of mind is considered and other factors leading to temporary mental instability (e.g. economic hardship, marital situation, experience or ability to take care of a child, and trauma resulting from the birth) are considered in sentencing.

WOMEN WHO KILL BECAUSE OF DOMESTIC AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONCERNS

Womanhood, motherhood and marriage are important for many African women. Societal norms may put pressure on women to perform and conform, as exemplified by the interviewee Memory, in *A tragedy of lives* – a school drop-out who is barely educated enough for a formal job. She suffers a double tragedy when her husband dies, leaving her with a baby to look after. She finds domestic work but soon falls pregnant again. Her new employer does not tolerate a baby on the premises, so she gives birth secretly in the servant's quarters as she is not registered at a clinic. The

baby dies soon after, perhaps due to a lack of medical attention, and she is arrested. Her crime is deemed to be socio-economically motivated. She is tried and sentenced to community service, but because she is homeless she remains in prison. Memory has not mourned her baby and refuses to discuss her feelings. Her detachment from this baby is much like that of the fictional Mazvita in Vera's *Without a name* (1994), however for Memory it is real and stems from a socio-economic desire to keep her job and maintain her other living child rather than a desperate quest for freedom. Imprisonment and sentencing soon after the baby's death do not allow her time to grieve, but this circumstance does not seem to affect her much, which is possibly a covert manifestation of her state of mind. The *Infanticide Act*, 27 of 1990, (Chap. 9:12) states that

a woman who, within six months of the birth of her child, unlawfully and intentionally causes the child's death at a time when the balance of her mind is disturbed as a result of giving birth to the child, shall be guilty of the offence of infanticide and liable to imprisonment for a period not exceeding five years.

Psychologically, young mothers like Memory often feel overwhelmed and depressed by their new parental responsibilities. Along with subsequent emotional changes and birth trauma, this may lead to infanticide. Infanticide is often a cry for help by overwhelmed women (Oundo 2012). Paradoxically, traditional Shona cultural mores are opposed to any attempts at destroying a foetus but sanctions infanticide in cases of physical deformity, albinism or multiple births (Gelfand 1973).

It is held that when setting the minimum term of imprisonment, relevant consideration is given to the circumstances of the offence, the offender's personal circumstances, the protection of the community, and the offender's prospects of rehabilitation (Sherratt 2000). Often the woman concerned is ignorant of the relevant legal processes and has no idea about entering a plea which involves genuinely mitigating circumstances. There are usually mitigating circumstances when a woman takes the drastic decision to commit abortion or infanticide. Some neglect to use contraception and end up with an unwanted pregnancy/child; others suffer financial insecurity or are ignorant of the options available (adoption, orphanages). All these factors may place increasing pressure on a woman. A high court judge passing sentence in the case of the state versus a woman who aborted her baby (February 24, 2004) said:

The effect of punishment is an intentional infliction of suffering on an offender and an expression of society's disapproval of their offence. In doing so, those who are charged with the impositions of punishment should, in my view, *carefully weigh the consequential harm on the offender against the society's expectations*. (www.zimlil.org/zw/judgement/bulawayo-high-court/2004/9, emphasis added)

In *A tragedy of lives*, Babra's case rests on economic forces: she already has a child to take care of. Exercising flawed agency when her lover refuses to take

responsibility, as does the fictional Joel in Vera's *Without a name* (1994), Babra has an illegal abortion. She is left to suffer alone – a true reflection of the nature of patriarchal subjugation and oppression, especially in urban settings. Babra's is the only optimistic experience recounted in this text, as a boyfriend later stands by her and marries her upon her release from prison. This is indeed an Africana womanist ideal.

During the interviews it transpires that the prison guards take punitive measures to the extreme, inflicting psychological pain on inmates who are already undergoing the 'pains of imprisonment' (Sykes 1958). Although some guards treat the prisoners as humanely as they can safely do, too many of them do not. There are several examples of deliberate cruelty being perpetrated on the women, as detailed in the interviews. One inmate, Martha, is beaten for complaining about the poor quality of the baby food. Another, Maureen, reveals that mistakes are met with physical harassment and that crying out is not permitted. Lilian, a teacher, is humiliated verbally and subjected to physical discomfort by being issued filthy prison linen and garb, while other inmates are made to sing and dance to ditties and re-enact their crimes. Such treatment does not offer any redemption. Rather, as indicated by Fortunate, another ex-prisoner, one might leave prison worse off than before, as the guards' behaviour appears to deviate seriously from efforts at effective rehabilitation (Musengezi and Staunton 2003). Perhaps these acts are perpetrated in the mistaken belief that they can deter the prisoners from future crimes. The statutory limits which the guards ought to be guided by, clearly spell out the following:

Article 50 Rights of arrested and detained persons

(c) must be treated humanely and with respect to their inherent dignity; and

(5) (d) to conditions of detention that are consistent with human dignity, including the opportunity for physical exercise and the provision at State expense of adequate accommodation, ablution facilities, personal hygiene, nutrition, appropriate reading material and medical treatment. (*Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment*, 20 of 2013)

Female prisoners' rights, which are already compromised in the wider society, are often further undermined inside correctional facilities, thus adding to the trauma they may already be suffering for having killed their own. The mourning they may engage in while in prison cannot effect much healing or bring the closure which is so necessary following the loss of a loved one.

For some of the women it is, however, impossible to grieve for their loved ones in the prison environment. Only after three years in prison was the interviewee Tabeth able to visit her daughter's grave (Tabeth had beaten her to death for circulating rumours that she and her mother were engaging in witchcraft). For years, Tabeth suffered deep mental turmoil, as she could not come to terms with the knowledge that she had killed her own child: '[Y]our mind gets restless, especially in my case, as I dreaded the inevitable, seeing my daughter's grave ...' (Musengezi and Staunton

2003, 101). She found solace in interactions with fellow inmates, but the guards exacerbated her pain with their relentless taunts. Upon her release, Tabeth visited her daughter's grave and only managed to throw a symbolic handful of sand, as dictated by Shona culture, but she continues to mourn her daughter's death. Fulton and Gottesman (1980) suggest that the volume and intensity of grief is proportionate to the psychological value one person may have for another within a family system. For Tabeth, guilt, self-hatred and blame have taken precedence, as her actions stand in contrast to the nurturing nature of ordinary women.

Some interviewees show strength of character and refuse to give in to hopelessness and bitterness (Harold-Barry 2013). Fortunate, who is doing time for fraud, castigates the Zimbabwe prison system for its concern with inflicting physical pain at the expense of shifting mind-sets and attitudes to bring about total redemption for prisoners. She argues that the inner person is left untouched and unchanged (Musengezi and Staunton 2003). Potentially, felons can grow hardened through undeserved torture, thus creating recidivists as confirmed by the inmate, Monica. She notes a distinct lack of focus among some young girls who seem tolerant of life in prison, where they are clothed and fed by the state. However, most interviewees experience a Damascene conversion and are determined to avoid a life of crime. Some unfortunates start out as decent people, but society pushes them in a direction where they cannot find their way back to a normal life.

Culturally, women are often socialised into silence, staying in abusive marriages and constantly putting their lives at risk, as witnessed by the interviewees Beti and Maria. Both women killed their husbands for inflicting physical, emotional and mental abuse on them. Battered women can react violently so that their suffering becomes visible and the man is held publicly accountable; such abuse is usually considered a private, domestic affair (Harden and Hill 1998). While some violent crimes are attributable to female hormonal imbalances, there is little social expectation of women to be violent offenders. Generally such actions are explained as uncharacteristic behaviour. However, some crimes are driven by cultural beliefs, such as witchcraft, rather than hormonal imbalances or manipulation by men. Accusations of witchcraft or related liminality are also cited as causal factors in homicides committed by women, unlike the majority of those interviewed in *A tragedy of lives*. Crimes of passion also feature and these seem to reflect moral degeneration and misguided approaches to problem solving. Social media may contribute to the disintegration of the family unit, as illustrated by the case of a Chitungwiza woman, a nurse who drugged and castrated her husband after she discovered intimate messages from another woman on his phone. In this instance poverty is not the push factor – even a professional can be driven to homicide by infidelity and adultery. That is, women's roles as wives can be so undermined that it motivates them to commit a heinous crime.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Skills training, as a mitigating strategy against continued helplessness post-imprisonment, does not appear to be well managed. Women may still leave prison without having acquired any marketable skills, as articulated by the interviewee Viola (Mapfuwa 2007). It is important for the state and other prisoner support organisations to assist with relevant skills development as this will reduce recidivism and limit the potentially damaging psycho-sociological effects of imprisonment. Such measures could ease women's reintegration into society.

Stigmatisation by relatives or neighbours may impact badly on women who have been to prison. Obviously underestimating the impact of poverty, it has been suggested that women may commit infanticide if their circumstances preclude them from obtaining adequate finances to raise a child, but this is a social problem, not a psychological one (unnamed blogger, www.dailybeast.com). The advice that women could consider adoption if their families are unwilling or unable to help them raise their child is of limited value, because in Zimbabwe adoption is controversial and rarely practised (Muza 2007). In traditional Shona society raising a child was a communal effort, but in modern times, thanks to urbanisation, this practice is dying out. Infanticide thus becomes a difficult yet conscious choice, made out of desperation. However, for women who commit abortion or infanticide, harsh prevailing economic conditions coupled with conservative social and cultural expectations are mitigating factors. No provision of counselling services is evident *A tragedy of lives*. The interviewees are possibly not aware of such processes if no overt sessions are set up, because even the poorest accused will be presented *pro bono publico*. Often magistrates sentence female offenders to community service rather than imprisonment, in consideration of their family responsibilities.

Overhauling the judicial system so that retributive punishment is abolished and compensation instigated is one possible avenue for ensuring that individuals survive the damaging psycho-social effects of imprisonment. This promotes the idea of collective responsibility rather than retributive punishment, which forcibly removes an individual from society. Yet such options should not overlook the gravity of homicide: it is the taking away of someone's basic right to life. Whatever modifications are made to the laws governing the sentencing of offenders, cognisance must be taken of the purpose of incarceration, which is to discourage repeat offenses or create negative models – especially for youths. In that way the Africana woman can authenticate her role as an African woman, because it provides a reliable system of support if she herself is reliable. The women interviewed in *A tragedy of lives* are examples of the disintegration of family unity and a loss of integrity through the callous act of killing.

CONCLUSION

A tragedy of lives frames a social order in which women's survival is inextricably linked with that of men. Several push factors in respect of female homicide emerged from the literary analysis of the semi-autobiographic work interrogated here: economic hardship; social persecution; fear of family and abandonment by partners. Hormonal imbalances were only considered in mitigation of a woman's emotional state in cases of illegal abortion or post-natal homicide, but other mitigating socio-cultural and economic factors were identified. It is important for women to be empowered with the appropriate skills necessary for them to survive economic disadvantage. The women interviewed here all expressed a desire to contribute meaningfully to the communities in which they initially committed their crimes. True to African womanist philosophy, women who cooperate with their male counterparts can achieve higher levels of autonomy, which will allow them to negotiate with men as equals and thus ultimately gain a potentially fulfilling life.

Prison life is an eye-opener for women who must bear the socio-cultural and socio-economic brunt of being an ex-felon who is trying to reintegrate into society. Patriarchal statutes also affect women negatively, leading them to make ill-advised decisions. An awareness of the choices available to them, regardless of their educational and/or economic backgrounds, can help minimise family disintegration as well as the psychiatric and psychological trauma women suffer due to imprisonment. The family unit is vital in ensuring the survival of communities and societies. Therefore, when women cross boundaries and kill they serve a treble sentence: physical imprisonment, mental self-torture and the likelihood of being a pariah once they have paid their debt to society. Although the law exacts retribution for homicide, socio-cultural mores often demand compensation for the victim's family. This tends to lead to family estrangement and disintegration, which serves to increase the negative psycho-social effects on women who have served time.

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