

**The Impact of Social Stigma on the Female Spouses of the Incarcerated Individuals**

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## **Acknowledgement**

*"Home is where heart is"* this is what my mom has taught me

I like to thank my family for being kind and supportive for the three years I have been in College. To my husband who was always supportive and inspiring me. Also I would like to thank the staff at Mount joy visitor centre for having me work with them and for the support they have offered me through out. For Thandeka you are great my daughter your kindness and your support I will always cherish. Also I would like to thank the DBS staff for giving me this great opportunity and their kindness.

## **Abstract**

The aim of the study was to identify the impact of social stigma on the wives of imprisoned men in the Dublin area of Ireland. The objectives were to highlight the specific experiences of the wives that are as a result of social stigma and the strategies they employ in order to cope with these experiences. The study method was qualitative with semi-structured interviews as the data collection instrument. The interviews were conducted with a sample size of 4. Thematic analysis was used to identify the themes in the participant's narrations. After analysis, the following themes were identified; social isolation, financial burden, emotional distress, avoidance behaviour, and increases sense of independence. The identified themes all had bearing on social stigma, with avoidance and increased sense of independence as the coping strategies. There is already overwhelming evidence that families of imprisoned men experience social stigma. However, the evidence largely associates this experience with the family members in general, and has mostly been gathered outside Ireland. This study contributes to the literature by focusing specifically on the spouses of the imprisoned men and identifying their lived experiences of social stigma, and their coping strategies

## **A Literature review**

### **Introduction**

This paper is a review of the literature on the impact of imprisonment on the female spouses of imprisoned men. Much has been written about the social stigma that is associated with imprisonment, on the family members of the imprisoned, and sometimes, their friends. As well, governments have come up with policies to address some of the challenges faced by the families of imprisoned people, although there are no policies found in the literature which address the challenges of social stigma associated with imprisonment. This literature review is used to highlight the knowledge gap in the area of social stigma associated with imprisonment. Particular attention is paid to the challenges of social stigma that the female spouses of imprisoned men have to face. This review is part of research designed to with the aim of identify the social challenges that are faced by the female spouses of the incarcerated men in Dublin area.

This study will contribute to the literature by highlighting the social issues faced by the female spouses of the incarcerated individuals in Dublin. Because other studies concentrated on children in the UK, and some on the entire families in America, and others on mothers who were incarcerated. None of these studies has specifically

concentrated on the female spouses of incarcerated individual. It is apparent that none of the studies was carried out in the Republic of Ireland and none of them studied the challenges faced by the spouses of incarcerated. The reason to focus on the female spouses of the incarcerated individuals is that they are the ones who are left to take care of the children where there are any, and how they cope with the challenges has far reaching effects on the development of the children and the wider society. Also the spouse's coping strategies have direct effect on their mental state and socioeconomic functions. The intended site of this study will be Mount Joy Prison as I feel this is the most appropriate place to contact prospective respondents ( female spouses of incarcerated men), and conduct the study. A total of five respondents will be required for the study and the planned interview will be 40-60 minute per interview.

## **Imprisonment in Ireland**

In the society we live in crime is perceived as a deviant, however, this differs from culture to culture. In other words, in some cultures crime is not an issue; rather it is something that people are used to or is something they do not worry about. Tovey believes that crime as a serious social problem in Irish society. In his views, those who are engaged in crime are those who are less fortunate and excluded in society (Tovey, 2000). In addition to this, Rittman's (cited in Tovey, 2000) states that in the

Dublin metropolitan city 84% of offenders were young male and 80 % were in Mount joy prison and often were from the poorer areas. However in recent years since the 1980s till 1990s, the rate of crime is increasing in Ireland as it shows that prison population has increased during those years (O' Donnell, 2005). O'Donnell continues to say that despite the fact that prison population was increasing crime was not the most important problem facing the country. Even in the 1990s Ireland was seen as a country that was not obsessed with crime, until the death of Veronica Guerin, which indicated that criminal gangs felt they could operate as they wanted . In that respect, crime became something that society and the state decided to act upon. In other words the state decided to tighten its laws against crime, and policies were amended.

Mount Joy Prison was built in 1850. It is located in North Circular road Dublin, to hold about 547 prisoners. Initially it was designed for political prisoners during the Irish struggle for independence (O' Mahony, 2000). However, in recent years Mount joy prison is being used to accommodate different types of individuals both males and females with different types of criminal convictions.

### **Effect of imprisonment on family members of prisoners**

Tovey and Share (2000) have defined crime as a deviant that breaks the social rules; however, this depends on the society and culture. In other words, if a certain culture does not think crime is a deviant behaviour then it will mean that crime will be



accepted as a norm in that culture. The criminal justice will be blamed, since it will enforce the law and send the criminals to prison. As Travis (2005) has put it that society creates criminals and social justice is the system that labels people involved in minor, probably transitory deviant as criminals, because of that those individuals will be stigmatised permanently.

Stigmas are those feelings that makes one feel disrespected or unloved. Goffman (1963) used the term "spoiled identity" to illustrate the negative perceptions of an individual by the society, whereby the individual is considered, in some sense, to possess certain inferior characteristics. According to Kuper & Kuper (2004) it is derived from Latin and Greek to denote brand or mark. And in Latin 'stigmatae' was used in reference to branded slaves. It is regarded as a term that involves both deviance and prejudice; however, it goes beyond that (Hearthorn et al, 2000). This is in line with the labelling theory that seeks to label an individual who does not follow the rules and the norms that society creates. Lemert et al. However, Buttler (2008) believes that the political response to crime can have a powerful impact on public or society. Buttler believes that media and politicians have their own way of perceiving crime which makes the society feel unsafe. And these in turn influence the quality of life regardless of the level of criminal activity. In other words, the way crime is published in the eyes of the society, whether big or small, has made society feel unsafe or to be at risk of being robbed or killed. Furthermore, Stiles and Kaplan (1996) argue that individuals who are stigmatised are more likely to experience

exclusion in society, and sometimes they can spend more time in prison than those who are not stigmatised. This is in reference to those individuals are not fully considered in society because they possess attributes that are considered to be threats and are unpredictable. As such their chances for interaction and participation in society are limited. In addition, stigma has been identified as a major social ill which accompanies incarceration and it is visited upon the family and friends of the incarcerated (O Mahony, 2002).

According to Braman (2007) imprisonment, shame and stigma do not affect the prisoner himself as he will be living with other convicts, but those who are the members of the family who have to be with their friends, families and community. Sometimes it is for this reason many relatives of the prisoner hide the incarceration of a family member not only from friends, co-workers and fellow congregates but also other family members. He continued to mention that the problems that families face because of incarceration differ; it could be drug addictions that will tear the family apart. Sometimes when a man is in and out of the prison system the woman has to struggle to support herself and her children financially, in other instances the woman loses custody of their children.

### **Family and social policy**

Policies are the rules that are set for the well-being of the people, sometimes those rules can be unfair to other people and sometimes they will need to be changed. They

can be organised by government, churches, neighbours or social groups. Those policies are designed to improve the welfare of the human being which includes education, health and social security (Blakemore, 2007). It is in the interest of public and social policies that citizens are protected from danger. However, those policies do not take into consideration the innocent children of the incarcerated whom they do not protect. It can also be argued that these policies are more concerned with economic issues than the wellbeing of the human beings. In Ireland family policy has been set for the wellbeing of the family which includes child protection. Kiely et al (1999)

### **Support for prisoner's families**

In most cases in Ireland when a family member is not working or has financial difficulties the family and social welfare does help with some funds. In the case of parenting alone, One Parent payment was made to replace the prisoner's wives payment that ended on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of January 1997. This was announced by the then Minister for social and family affairs. Brennan (2006). Also it is apparent that non-governmental agencies like St Vincent de Paul do help prisoners and their families by providing financial and clothes. Sometimes they help with basic needs such as food.

### **Prison as institution**

According to Burnett and Maruna (2006) prison service fail to engage with prisoners, as such these individuals are not being fairly treated like citizens. They argue that

criminal justice promotes slave labour in the name of service; individual men who have spent time in prison may find it hard to reconcile.

### **Antisocial behaviour and theory of social disorganisation**

Thrasher (1927; cited in Wood and Alleyne, 2009) argues that theory of social disorganisation is seen when a family or institution fails to hold or neglects the adolescent boy's interest. It forces them to the street to become members of gangs. In addition when established social orders like schools fails to compensate them from their parent's ignorance, they are lead to be involved in street gang behaviour.

A study titled 'Impact of incarceration and the stigma that children experience when a parent is in prison' was conducted by Murray and Farrington (2005). It looked at the effect the imprisonment has on boys especially when a parent is sent to prison. They hypothesised that when a parent is sent to prison the boys will be more likely to develop an antisocial behaviour partly because of the trauma of incarceration. The method that was used in this study is longitudinal , which included 411 boys and their parents, it also used two groups, one control group and one experiment group in London. The results that were found in the experiment group were the issues of antisocial behaviour. They found that children are most vulnerable especially when a parent is in prison. The social stigma they faced since they will lack support love and

financial stability was more than in children who came from the stable families. They argued that the government did not support the children of incarcerated parents; as such both children and parents were politically, socially excluded by both government and society. They explained that they were both not allowed to vote nor participate in the social activities in schools. In addition, Travis (2005) mentioned that imprisonment affects households and child development. And this study found that when a parent is sent to prison the impact of it will be on the family relationship and the stigma the children will be facing. In other words when a parent is sent to prison the child will have to face challenges that are associated with the stigma. And thus for boys it will increase their antisocial behaviour. When a member of the family is sent to prison his or her relationship with a partner will be affected and where children are involved they will have to face challenges associated with stigma.

### **Imprisonment and family and the stability of family**

Tovey and Share (2000) define crime as a deviant behaviour that breaks social rules and those rules are associated with law, which defers from culture and society and how that society perceived it. Tovey and Share (2000) believe that it depends on the way society perceives crime. However, Braman (cited in Travis 2005) argues that imprisonment affects families in different ways in households and in child development. As such criminal justice creates “gender imbalance” mostly is because when a young man or woman is sent to prison he or she is being removed from the traditional rhythm of marriage, courtship, dating and family formation, and possibly

accompanied by stigmatisation. This study of Braman (2005) focused on the family as a whole. He found that most men especially young men who are in and out of the prison find it hard to formulate families.

### **Social and economic issues**

According to Fishman (1990), some individuals grew up in difficult situations that include alcoholic parents and poor socio-economic backgrounds that led them to be involved in criminal activities since they did not get the chance to get some education. In these situations, Fishman continues to say that these individuals, especially men, have been in and out of the prison, and even though some were married, they still continued with these bad habits. In her views, women who are partners with these men face lots of challenges. Firstly, they are forced into involuntary separation; secondly, when their partners are sent to prison some will be forced to seek financial support from the social welfare which makes them to be looked down upon. Fishman (1990) claims that when a man is sent to prison his partner faces challenges one of which is financial, and this is in view of the fact that some of these individuals never had a stable job since they were in and out of the prison. In other words, they never financially supported their partners anyway. She continues to mention that when a man is sent to prison the partner need to come to terms with facing a lot of challenges. Sometimes these women need to accommodate few patterns in order to face their relations and friends, like trying to preserve the marriage, maintaining good attitude towards the relationship with their husbands,

including waiting for them to come back after their prison sentences (Fishman, 1990). However, in contrast to their counterparts it is found that men find it hard to keep the relationship when a wife or girlfriend is in prison (Bench, et al, 2005). They also continued to mention that, the stigma that women experience carries a great weight, since they have to prove themselves as worthy citizens to others in order to be accepted in community than their counterparts. It can be argued that when a man is in prison he seems to get a lot of support from his partner and children than when a woman is sent to prison. Following what Fishamn (1990) and Bench et al (2005) views the woman carries the burden of raising the kids alone, trying to protect them from friends and family who can easily stigmatise them. She also has to try and make sure the relationship with her partner is maintained until he is released from prison. And this goes on and on especially when he is always in prison.

### **The relationship between families and prisoner**

The study of Comfort( 2007) find that these women had to resist the prison as well as use it to their advantage by maintaining relationship with incarcerated individual, which entails large sacrifice of time, and financial resources. This at the end has made these women to believe that the prison is a system that is racist, unjust, demanding and unfair. Although in Comfort's views prison can sometimes act as an effective man management tool. Since some women believed that when their partners are sent to prison they become more sensitive, open, and more controlled than when

they were living in the “free world” (Comfort, 2007). In the light of this, it can be argued that prison not only separates the family but it acts as a correctional service for others. Secondly when men are released on parole while they struggle to reconnect with the society, it is the women who give emotional support.

When an individual is in prison it is very important that he gets contact from the family, which could be a telephone call, letter or a visit. However, those contacts can be negative if the intimate partner relationship is poor (Zamble and Quency, 1997). However, arguing in this context Sarason, Sarason and Pierce (1991) believe that in order to understand the close or intimate relationship of the individual it is essential to look at the person's history of relationships. In other words, if the individual had bad experiences in his relationships it is more likely that this will continue. Referring back to the families it can be argued that a man, who has history of bad relationship in his life, will continue to do so by not engaging fully in his relationships.

## **Conclusion**

The literature review has identified a number of studies on the impact of imprisonment on the families and friends of those who are imprisoned. However, most of the work in this area has concentrated on the impact of imprisonment on the children, and the burden of raising the children single handedly by the female spouses while the husbands are in prison. And some others have highlighted the impact of imprisonment on the interpersonal relationships between the imprisoned persons and



their spouses. Furthermore, others have identified the wider social impact of imprisonment with respect to its potentially disruptive effect on the normal social development of younger members of the society. This is in reference to the instance of imprisonment which hampers the accepted social behaviour of courtship, as the imprisoned individual is effectively excluded from this process due to his/her constraints as a result of imprisonment. It is worth noting that none of these studies focused on highlighting the challenges of social stigma faced by the female spouses of the imprisoned men in Ireland. It is this identified gap in the literature that this study intends to fill. The findings will hopefully bring the issue of social stigma as a result of imprisonment to the attention of the policy makers so that support can be offered to the affected individuals. And as the literature review has shown, there is no form of support available in the area.

The objectives of this study were to identify the specific experiences resulting from social stigma faced by the wives of imprisoned men. Also to identify the coping strategies employed by the wives to minimise the impact of social stigma.

The research question is how are the social stigma impacts on the women spouses of the incarcerated men.

## **Methodology**

The method used for this study was qualitative, the reason qualitative was chosen was because qualitative helps the researcher to observe the participants and also it helps in interpreting the meanings the participants brings to the researcher while quantitative was more on statistics. Williman, (2006) the data collection was by semi-structured interviews. Also adopting thematic analysis as this research was looking for in- depth source of data. As Ritchie and Lewis (2003) suggest, semi-structured interview allows the researcher to obtain knowledge or meaning without using leading questions.

## **Participants**

Four women spouses of the incarcerated individuals were interviewed. Access to participants was gained through the manager of the Mountjoy visitor centre, sent the letter to the prison governor. The researcher who was volunteering at the time in Mountjoy visitor centre spoke to the manager about the study and gave her the request letter. Because of the time limit the researcher had to change the venue for the interviews, she contacted the participants individually and explained the study and ask their permission to conduct the study privately instead of the prison premises. The intention was to interview five participants but one had to pull out because of the family circumstances. All the participants selected had spouses in Mountjoy prison and all live in the Dublin area. One was not married yet but had a long time relationship with her partner she was also pregnant. The participants selected were between 29- 50yrs old. The participants had different lifestyles some were employed, getting single parent allowance and were also house wives never worked. Because of the changes that came with the industrialisation in Ireland not only Irish citizens were selected some women from other countries who are residents in Ireland Dublin area were also included in the study. Confidentiality was considered extreme important therefore all interviews that were reordered were disposed after obtaining the results.

## **Apparatus**

All interview were recorded in the voice digital recorder, this was considered an effective for the capturing the recorded interviews. However, the interviews were recorded with the participants consent. Also Nivivo 8 software was used in analysing the data.

## **Questionnaire**

Questionnaire was designed for this interview to guide the researcher to cover all relevant topics. However these were not leading questions they were open ended questions to allow the participants to express their feelings to the issues they were experiencing. Ritchie and Lewis (2003) Participant were interviewed at their own homes at the time of their choice and convenient. They were semi structured interviews to allow the participants to express their own views, and also to allow any potential issue that may arise and should be explored during the interviews. The questionnaire contained 25 questions that were related to social stigma. The copy of the interview is in appendix 1. The researcher made sure that the participants were comfortable at all times.

By reassuring them that the interviews will be confidential and they will be disposed after wards. Participants felt more comfortable since they were at their own space. Most of them were literate there were no problems in terms of communication as they express their thoughts in a very clear and understandable manner. The interviews lasted between 15-25 minutes this was mainly due to the participants emotional feelings they had during the interviews.

## **Procedure**

The study aimed to examine the social challenges that are faced by the female spouses of the incarcerated men in Dublin area. The issues that were looked at were. Social stigma, support for these women especially where there were children involved, also their coping strategies since their spouses are in prison. Using qualitative method allowed the researcher to gather all the data needed as well to have opportunity to observe and allow the participants to express their feelings during the interview Ritchie and Lewis (2003).

## **Limitations**

There were many limitations in carrying this study firstly was the venue which the researcher needed a permission from the prison Governor, secondly the time limit prevented the researcher to conduct the interviews at the prison premises. Therefore participants who were more familiar with the participants due to her volunteer job in the visitor centre were contacted by the researcher and interviews were then conducted in the participant's private homes.

## **Ethical concern**

According to Ritchie and Lewis (2003) ethical concern are very essential when conducting a qualitative interview as participants will need assurance that the information they will provide will be confidential. Therefore each participants that participated in this study was given a

Confidentiality agreement signed by the researcher which stated that participants were given confidentiality and assurance that no information and copies of the interview will be distributed to others. As for the name and area will be changed to interviewee 1 and area 1. The copy of the consent form is in appendix 2, the participants were also informed that they could stop at any time if they felt they did not want to continue with the interview and also if they would feel uncomfortable. The reason for the study was also introduced to them.

## **Results**

### **Experiences**

This section of the research programme will present the data collected in the interviews that were conducted. It will link the results to the objectives, the themes that were found. Social Isolation, Coping Strategy, Avoidance and Increased sense of Independence.

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#### **Social isolation**

Most of the participants showed that since their partners are gone to prison, they had found it hard to maintain relationship with friends and neighbours. They even expressed their concern about their children's relationship with their friends in school and in the neighbourhood.

#### **Participant 1**

*"My friends don't understand why I chose to go out with such a bad guy some of them are ok like but you know people are not the same they are good people out there, You know for some people if you have a problem especially like this you will be an outcast you will actually feel it."*

Some of the participant felt that their neighbours have distanced themselves from them even though they don't say it but through their actions they could feel the distance.

#### **Participant 2**

"I have seen the way my neighbours are looking at me, that they are either afraid of me or they think I myself I am the same thing as my husband, they normally pass silly remarks not direct at me

but I know that they gossip about me".

This participant felt that her neighbours are not happy with her family since her husband is gone to prison; she believes that they are doing it because she is from a different country and therefore she is causing trouble.

Participant 2

*"The way they perceive you, you know they have carried this to their hearts. I can see from the way they look at me. You are from the foreign country you come in their country to mess up, forgetting that their people are there as well. Not only that the half of that prison is Irish people so what are they saying"?*

Participant 2, continues

*"It is very especially when you see people who normally will talk to you, but when now when they*

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*See you they will decide to cross to the other side of the road, I think is because they don't know what to say because they don't know whether they should mention it or just walk away."*

Although family is found supportive, to some participants they still have negative feelings about their partner's behaviour.

Participant 3

*"Right now my family don't want to be seen here. They don't want people to know they were here. They are ashamed! Ashamed! Of him and me as well because I have married him encouraged him to do what he has done they think I shouldn't have married him.*

*I think family and neighbours disappear when they hear oh my god! The word that he is been sent to jail, it is hard you can actually feel it"*

Participant 3

*"When he was sent to prison I knew my family is going to pull hard in terms of money, friends, and family"*

Participant 4

*“He was in bits and pieces, you know!! Another thing neighbours and family disappears when they hear he is in prison. If he will be in the hospital sick they will be here but now prison no,”*

When a man is in and out of prison, neighbours seem not to feel comfortable with him around. This is another concern the participants rose during the interview.

Participant 4

*“Neighbours won't let their husbands mix with him anyway, because they think he is a bad person, and he is not I don't know what comes to him sometimes.*

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The participants are more concern about their children the way children feel around their friends at school especially what it is said around them.

Participant 3

*“Other children seem to say things to them ehm... (Pause) your daddy is in jail,*

*Daddy is a jail bird you know. They go to see him and not understand why he is behind bars and not come home with them. They see other kids being collected by their daddy's and they miss that and this makes impact in their lives they want to be like other children you know.*

### **Coping Strategy**

Having a partner in prison can have a lot of impact in the lives of those left behind especially women spouses, these individuals worry a lot especially for the kids they had to raise and take them to school, take the kids to visit their father's those are the challenges they have to face every day as long as their partners are in prison, they have expressed a lot of emotions and showed that support is of importance to them.

Participant 1

*“I don't like it because I am alone like you know.... (Pause) if not because of my family I don't know*



I would have been. Probably I would be in depression, but I take things slowly one at a time.

*"My dad is not happy at all you know how dad's are when comes to their daughters, but they know that we are together anyway so they need to be supportive not leave me alone."(Cries.....,)*

It also shows that the relationship between some families stay strong especially in times of need they stick together and support each other without being judgemental, even if they live apart from each other they still try to keep contact. Which leaves the participants to feel accepted by the families?

Participant 2

*"They will call and ask me how am I coping with kids and you know ....( cries ) They have tried to bail him out but there is nothing we all can do you know....( pause) They are not judgemental no,, they are supporting me psychologically you know."*

For participants family need to support them despite of what has happened, because is not their fault that their partners are serving prison sentences. Without their family they wouldn't cope.

*"I need emotional support is not my fault really is it? (Pause). No is not, I am a human being as well so that is why I don't understand when people judge you for something you did not do."*

Participant 4

*"As I have said if not because of my family I don't know..."*

Participant 2

*"Yea they do there is nothing they can do I am the family I didn't send him to do what he has done I need them anyway."*

It has showed that all participants were affected by the

Participant 1

Effect on them they can't cope very well.

*"Well for him not being there it does affect me like, I keep thinking all the time wondering how was life going to be like if I hadn't met with him you know,*

*I am affected very, very, hard emotional I am. I don't like talking about it too much.*

*It is really hurting; most of the times I pretend this situation is not there try to live my life.*

### **Financial Support**

Participants were more concerned about their financial situation especially when their partners are not there to take care of the family, in terms of paying for school trips, extra activities in school.

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Participants find it hard to cope alone in this situation they can't afford things they use to get when their partners were around. Especially when some of them were only relying only on social welfare allowance, which they considered insufficient to support the family.

*"(Laughter.....), what do I get? lone parents allowance, I get only single parents allowance which is very, very, small trying to keep the car that I need to transport the kids every week to go see their father, petrol is 40Euros a week which I take out from the lone parents allowance, Then you are left with 200Euros or so in that I need to feed them, clothe them it is very hard it takes all the energy out of you.*

*Then I have to think on what I will be giving them for dinner tomorrow? ....pause. (Cries ... and Laughter)*

Sometimes participants need to consider other places when they are desperate for money. But still in those places sometimes the help they need won't be available for them.

*"I can't go to St Vincent de Paul; I can go to them when it's Christmas, or big celebration. I don't have the money for birthday presents.*

Some participants did not get any financial support from any one even family member.

*"When he was gone to prison I knew my family is going to pull hard in terms of money, family, and*

*Friends.*

### **Sense of Independent**

Participant 2 felt that she did not need any support because she was working hard, even though she needed to take care of her children, she can still cope on her own. She strongly felt that people around her are gossiping about her family and are not happy with her husband behaviour, for that reason she will not seek for any help from anybody.

*"It is tough you know, I have to keep the fire at home burning, I have to work long hours, I am in a strange country where there is no support you know....( pause), There is no support. actually I don't think I need support I think I am ok, I am working, I was always working .*

Participant 2 continues

*"I don't need to go around and start explaining to them that my husband is in prison because of fraud it is alright you see....pause...no, It will be alright. I know that he has learned his lesson now if not I don't know really, Here it doesn't worth it anyway, we really need to start another life you know."*

### **Avoidance**

Some participants preferred not to talk about the situation they were facing, they decided to keep it to themselves, since they believe that when people know they will be judged and the kids will be affected.

Participant 4

*"No, no, I just want to keep it to myself .... Laughter!!!!!!"*

Participant 3

*"Everybody seem to know what is happening right now, didn't tell everyone but they seem to know and children feel it"*

Participant 2

*"Well good thing about that one is that I don't discuss my personal life with them, I share my work"*

with them only, what concerns work it's only I discuss with them not my personal things. Because I also don't want to know about anybody's personal life you see even if I was sharing any information with them I don't think I was going to let them know this....

It also shows that the relationship between some families stay strong especially in times of need they stick together and support each other without being judgemental, even if they live apart from each other they still try to keep contact. Which leaves the

## **Discussion.**

This research was conducted in an aim to identify the challenges that are faced by the female spouses of the incarcerated men in Dublin area. With the emphasis on Social stigma

This section will examine and critically analyse the findings of the study and it will draw a conclusion based on what has been learnt through the research. The data that was obtained through interviews from the participants was of rich quality. The findings showed that women spouses of the Incarcerated men do hold very strong views about the stigma they get from people around them when their spouses are sent to prison. Therefore the labelling theory that was found in the literature review does support these findings

## **Experiences**

### **Social Isolation**

When a man is sent to prison a woman had to experience difficulties, she loses her friends, her neighbours and in some other instances she loses her extended family members. The reason for that is the stigma that people carry when they know that a man is in prison. Arguing also is Buttler, (2008) when he mentioned that media and politicians have their own way of perceiving crime which makes society feel unsafe and scared. It can be argued based on Buttler's views that when neighbours and friends realise one of their friends is in prison they don't feel safe around that individual or his family. Which leaves the woman isolated from the society which she lives in? Also arguing is Fishman (1990) who mentioned that when a man is in prison the woman had to struggle

to make sure that her relationship with him is maintained in order to protect herself from the stigma she gets from her family. Because of the way Society perceives crime, it is easy to see the reason

Why some family members refuse to associate with the woman spouse of the incarcerated men. Tovey and Share (2000) have stated that each and every society has its way of understanding crime, sometimes society categorise and label individuals because of their background not because they did not follow the norm and rules of that society. In other way societies are structured in a way that they have their rules and norms that binds them together. If an individual breaks those rules he or she will have to face the consequences of that. In view of this, we might not blame friends and neighbours for acting the way they act to the women spouse of the incarcerated individual. After analysing the data the results that were found indicated that women spouses who had their partners in prison experience social stigma, which affect them in different ways. Firstly, it has showed that when men are sent to prison the neighbours and friends that the wives had before don't want to associate with them like before, because they wouldn't understand why they had to marry bad men who are criminals.

*"Right now my family don't want to be seen here. They don't want people to know they were here. They are ashamed! Ashamed!"*

It can be seen how this attitude from the wives' friends and neighbours can leave them socially isolated. Social isolation was a recurrent theme in the wives narration of their experiences and they felt that the neighbours were being judgmental as they did not know the full circumstances of the imprisonment.

### **Emotional distress**

Participants were concerned about their children, they felt that their children were stigmatised in school by other children and that left them emotionally distressed. Travis (2005) argued that

imprisonment affect the family in many ways, especially the stigma that children will experience when a parent is sent to prison. The participants have demonstrated their concerns about their

Children they have mentioned that when a father is sent to prison their children are stigmatised in school by other children who call them names. To them it was very difficult to know that their children were pushed away in school by other children. Taking Braman's idea that when a parent is sent to prison a child will develop antisocial behaviour, an evident is found from the participants when they mentioned that their children are being stigmatized in school. When children do not socialize the chances for them to have normal behaviour is very slim, that is why the parents have emotional distress.

*"Other children seem to say things to them ehm... (Pause) your daddy is in jail"*

*"You know when your children come home and tell you that other children are saying bad things about their daddy, you feel sick inside you know what I mean.....very sick!"*

### **Financial Burden**

This is also being highlighted by the participants when they mentioned that when their partner are sent to prison they have the burden of raising the kids alone, they can't cope financially since no one is there to help them because of the prison. It can be strongly argued that imprisonment of a spouse puts financial pressure on the woman especially when the imprisoned husband was the breadwinner. This situation may exist in isolation from social stigma. But in some cases this situation can be worsened by social stigma. Analysis of the interview data revealed that social stigma contributed to some of the participants' financial burden. They have mentioned that if it

were that a man was sick in the hospital the family would be helping financially.

*"They don't want to know if he was in hospital sick they will be here helping, but since he is in prison no one want to be here."*

Fishman (1990) argues that when a man is sent to prison the woman will be forced to seek financial support from the social welfare which will make them to be looked down at. Fishman claims that when woman seek financial support from the social welfare she will be looked down at this might not be the case in Ireland since Lone parent allowance was made available for these individuals. Also it can be argued that not all women will be forced to seek financial assistance from the social welfare, because some participants had stable jobs they worked hard in order to maintain themselves and their family. Which was to avoid the social stigma that comes with financial burdens? It can be also argued that when parents are having financial burdens that become a barrier for their children's education, it might that they do not want to be their families to help because they are avoiding social stigma, that will come with that.

### **Coping With the Impact of Social Stigma.**

The participants have mentioned that they find it difficult to cope with the impact of social stigma when their partners are sent to prison, by being isolated from the society which they belong to. They have mentioned that when they feel depressed and lonely. However, some participants have mentioned that family members have helped them by keeping them company; they have also helped in terms of accommodating them.

### **Avoidance**

Some participants decided not to let their colleagues, friends and family to know that their partners are in prison since they believed that they will be stigmatized by them. One of the recurrent themes in the interview data is avoidance. One can argue that this does not eliminate the problem that is



being avoided. But it can be a relief from emotional distress. Some of the participants employed this strategy in coping with their husbands' imprisonment but more importantly in avoiding potential social stigma.

*"Well good thing about that one is that I don't discuss my personal life with them,*

Also Braman (2007) has argued that imprisonment does not affect the prisoners, but those who are left behind will be one who experiences social stigma from their family and society. For this reason

They decide not to discuss it with their relatives and co-workers. Braman might be correct in his study, some participants have mentioned that they did not want to discuss their personal life with their colleagues, taking Braman's views it is easier to see that the participants are avoiding the social stigma. However, it can also be argued that when they do not talk to other people is not necessarily society that is isolating them, but they are imposing social isolation on themselves.

### **Sence of Independence**

Sense of independence was found in some participants, when they mentioned that they prefer not to seek any help from anyone, because they were working and now they will be working harder doing long hours.

*"It is tough you know, I have to keep the fire at home burning, I have to work long hours, I am in a strange country where there is no support you know....( pause), There is no support. Actually I don't think I need it"*

Some of the participants expressed increased sense of independence as they preferred to continue to support themselves without seeking help from anybody. It can be argued that they did that in order to avoid social stigma, it can also be that the none Irish participants may have felt too ashamed to seek help from their Irish neighbours whom they assumed would stigmatised them. This can be classified as a positive coping strategy which serves two purposes; minimising help seeking behaviour, and reducing financial burden.

## **Conclusion**

The objectives of this study was to identify the specific experiences resulting from the social stigma faced by the women spouses of imprisoned men, and to identify the coping strategies employed by the women spouses to minimise the impact of social stigma. The themes that were found during the interviews were social isolation, emotional distress, financial burden, avoidance, and sense of independence. The participants had strong views on their social status; they all showed that they were isolated from the society which they live in because of the imprisonment of their partners. It also showed that because of the imprisonment of their partners it was hard for them to receive financial help from their friends and family which left them emotionally distressed. Also it showed that some

Participants avoided the social stigma by not telling their colleagues and their family members about the incarceration of their partners, therefore they decided to work hard and be financially independent. The identified themes are in line with evidence in the literature on the impact of social stigma when a man is sent to prison leaving behind a family. Although there has not been any previous study on this issue in Ireland with female spouses as participants, but other studies in other countries had identified issues relating to social stigma and their effects on the children and the family in general. One could have drawn inference from these studies and assumed the effects

direct and indirect, that social stigma would have on the wives specifically. However, this study has empirically identified these experiences, thereby eliminating the need for unsubstantiated assumptions. It is hoped that dissemination of the outcome of this study will help bring to fore the challenges posed by social stigma to the wives of the imprisoned men. This is in view of the evidence that wives become breadwinners when their husbands are sent to prison, and how they cope, with or without assistance, has a direct bearing on how their children (if any) adjust in society.

**Limitations of the study** Due to the small sample size, the outcome of the study cannot be generalised to the general population as is the case with purposeful sampling in qualitative studies. However, it may be theoretically generalised in view of the outcome's correlation with evidence in the literature. Also the participants were mainly of working class status. It is possible that the outcome may have been different with a sample group from a different sociocultural background. For instance, high income earners may not have financial burdens to deal with.

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## **Appendix**

Introduction: introduce yourself and the study

**Overall to lead t interview questions start by asking easy and comfortable questions**

1. Do you live far from here?
2. Do you have to take a bus /train?
3. Do you have kids to bring with?
4. If so do you have to arrange for a baby sitter when you are not bringing them over?

### **Section 1 of questions**

- a. Can you give me a little description of your life: e g tell me about your background?
- b. Do you see yourself as being part of a certain group or class?
  1. Is this problem of your partner being in prison happened for the first time?
  2. When he was sent to prison did you think it was going to be a challenge or a treat to you or your

family?

3. Is his arrest caused by someone else who put him in to trouble?
4. When this happened did you talk to your family or friends about it?
5. Did you ever talked to someone who is in the same situation as you?
6. How is your neighbor's attitude towards you since your partner is in prison?
7. How often do you come and visit him? And how do you find it?
8. In terms of contact do you write him or call him when you didn't come to see him?
9. Did you ever tried to seek help from other people?
10. Is his imprisonment affect you at some point?

## **Section 2 of questions**

1. Do you put off thinking about his arrest at some point even if you know you would at some point?
2. Did you try to talk to professionals about his arrest?
3. Did you talk to your partner about his arrest/ him being in prison?
4. Do you feel you are being supported in the society you live in since he has gone to prison?
5. How do you deal with this problem/ do you take it out to other people?
6. Have you felt any personal emotional and behavior problem?
7. Do you feel disturbed/ pot raid by the media?
8. What about politicians do you feel supported by them?
9. Do you think you are being treated differently since your partner is in prison?
10. Do you think about making plans to make things get better in your family life?
11. Do you think going to prison is seen normal in your area/society where you come from?

Transcripts symbols

Pause (.....Pause)

Cry (Cries.....)

High voice (!!)



Laugh (Laughs.....)

Participant were named participant 1-4