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# Moms Behind Bars: Motherhood in Eshowe Correctional Center

IndiAna Gowland  
*SIT Study Abroad*

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**MOMS BEHIND BARS:  
MOTHERHOOD IN ESHOWE CORRECTIONAL  
CENTER**

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South Africa: Social and Political Transformation  
Fall 2011

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## **Acknowledgments**

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## **Abstract**

Motherhood represents an integral part of human life. In South Africa particularly, mothers are primarily responsible for caring for their families, often with little or no help from a male partner. But what happens to the notion of motherhood when women find themselves separated from their children or raising children in a restrictive and harsh environment? This study looks at the construction of motherhood within Eshowe Correctional Facility for Women. I conducted research as an attachment to Phoenix Zululand, an organization that provides rehabilitation services to inmates in the prisons of Zululand. For two weeks, I lead Phoenix's program "Starting with Us" with a group of incarcerated mothers, focusing on and expanding the sessions that dealt with parenting. The results indicate that incarcerated mothers face myriad difficulties within the prison system. Central to this is their understanding of themselves as mothers. I find that these women are unable to reconcile their imprisonment with their identity as mothers, leaving them with feelings of guilt and inadequacy. I also look at the presence of a mother and child unit within Eshowe Correctional Center and provide suggestions for improvement based on the needs and recommendations of the mothers in prison.

## **Introduction**

Incarcerated women face difficulties within the prison system that male prisoners never experience. In the international experience, women constitute a minority of incarcerated persons and prison institutions treat them as such. In male dominated establishments, women's particular needs are often side-lined, meaning that women have less access to facilities, rehabilitation programs, and medical attention that specifically deals with the issues of females (Townhead 2006: 5). Prison systems inadequately address issues of motherhood. Across the globe, the

majority of women in prison are mothers. In South Africa in particular, an estimated 70% of the female inmates have children (Luyt 2008: 311). While the Department of Correctional Services has established various programs and policies to assist these women, the actual steps they have taken to implement these fall short in terms of helping women maintain healthy relationships with their children.

Researchers have conducted many studies that examine the impact of imprisonment on mother-child relationships; in fact, the children of imprisoned parents are a particular favorite for studies. However, despite the previous research, few studies have looked at the issue from the incarcerated mother's point of view. How do the women deal with separation? How do they cope with the loss of their status as a mother? One cannot begin to address the issue of mother-child relationships without properly examining both sides. This study attempts to fill in some of the holes by focusing on issues particular to incarcerated mothers in Eshowe Correctional Facility

The goal of this study was to examine the lives of mothers within Eshowe Correctional Facility, specifically how they construct notions of motherhood in prison given the mental and physical difficulties imposed on them. Within this broad goal, there were a few specific objectives.

- Analyze how incarcerated mothers construct notions of motherhood and to what extent the prison environment informs that understanding.
- Examine the presence of mother and child units within prison. How do they operate? What do inmates think about them? What do prison officials think about them?
- Shed light on the particular difficulties of mothers in prison and offer suggestions for programs to address those issues.

Although far from comprehensive, this paper will bring to light some of the issues mothers face while incarcerated. It will tell the story of seven women housed in Eshowe Correctional Facility and analyze their conceptions of motherhood. Particularly, it looks at whether these women have been able to reconcile their identity as mothers with their current incarceration, or whether they have maintained the same understanding of motherhood as before they entered the prison. The study also looked at the issues surrounding Mother and Child Units within the South African Correctional Services system. It does so through the thoughts and opinions of one mother currently housed in Eshowe Correctional Facility with her infant daughter and through the thoughts of other incarcerated mothers and social workers.

This paper begins with a premise that it is important for both incarcerated mothers and their children to develop and maintain healthy relationships while in prison. I argue that programs that promote visitation and communication between mothers and their children only address part of the issue. Before programs bring the children of inmates to visit their mothers, incarcerated women need to reshape their understanding of motherhood in order to discover that they can still play an instrumental role in their children's lives even if they are in prison. Similarly, the issues with mother and child units within prison extend far beyond the physical problems and into the ability of women to mother effectively while in a prison environment.

The paper consists of six sections. The first is a literature review, which details the previous research and writing done in the area of mothers in prison, both internationally and within South Africa particularly. The second section lays out the methodology of this study, specifically the use of participant observation in a restorative justice program and personal interviews. The next section highlights some of the limitations within the study. The fifth section

contains the results of the study. In this section, I argue that although the inmates in Eshowe Correctional Facility face difficulties unique to their status as inmates, they have not developed a new understanding of motherhood that conforms to their new situation as incarcerated mother. The fifth section of the paper is broken up into two subsections, one that details the issues of mothers separated from their children and one that looks at the mother and child unit in Eshowe Correctional Facility. Finally, the sixth section is a conclusion where I reiterate my major findings and provide some suggestions for both the prison system and rehabilitation programs to address the issues of incarcerated mothers.

## **Literature Review**

In this literature review, I will explore some of the debates surrounding incarcerated mothers, particularly the effects of maternal-child separation on both the mother and the child and the controversy around mother and child units within prisons. It will also highlight some of the programs created internationally and within South Africa that attempt to mitigate the negative effects of maternal imprisonment. Given the comparative lack of literature and research on the female inmate experience in South Africa, the literature review will look at a few international trends regarding the imprisonment of mothers and then hold a microscope to the South African experience to see if it follows the international trends or veers off in a different direction.

### *Maternal Imprisonment Internationally*

Motherhood is a transformative experience. Through giving birth and raising a child, a woman quite literally changes her identity from an independent individual to being responsible for the life of another. Motherhood also cannot be taken away; unlike jobs, romantic relationships, possessions, and almost everything else in life, the identity of a woman as a mother is something

permanent. That does not change when women enter prison. Although the prison system removes them from their children, the identity and feelings of a mother remain. “Most women in prison are mothers” (Townhead 2006, 5) and many of the debates regarding female inmates center on their role as mothers. The United Nations and the Quaker United Nations have published numerous articles and letters about the plight of mothers in prison, which differ greatly from the issues surrounding paternal incarceration. When fathers are arrested and sent to prison, usually a mother or mother-figure already exists to care for the children left behind and the family therefore remains relatively intact. However, when women enter prison, the family often breaks up because no father figure steps forward to single-handedly take on the parenting role (United Nations 2008:17). Since women constitute a minority of inmates internationally, there are fewer female prisons within any given country. This means that while men generally live in prisons close to their home, women from the same home might be forced to enter a prison further away because it is the only one in the area with a female unit. Distance therefore presents a severe barrier to family contact for incarcerated mothers, as families often cannot pay for the expenses associated with travel to and from the prison (United Nations 2008: 15).

Studies have found that for female inmates particularly, less contact with their children decreases their emotional and physical health and severely increases stress associated with parenting. This in turn causes increased anxiety, depression, and instances of misbehavior among the prisoners (Hoffmann, Byrd, and Kightlinger 2009: 399). The United Nations has recognized the unique relationship between mothers and children. The *Handbook for Prison Managers and Policymakers on Women and Imprisonment*, published by the UN in 2008, addresses such issues. “Children are a life-sustaining force for many prisoners and breaking the bond between the mother and child is punishment of the worst kind for the mother” (20). Given the severe consequences of maternal

imprisonment on the health of the mother, Townhead argues that female inmates should have a right to family visits (2006: 12). This goes against the international norm, which presupposes that visitation is a privilege that prisoners must earn, rather than a right that they are entitled to and can demand regardless of their status within the institution. However, in terms of incarcerated mothers, it is a strategy that should be seriously considered, if not for the health of the mothers themselves, then for the benefit of their innocent children.

Multiple studies have looked at the impact of the prison environment on motherhood within the United States prison system. Of particular note is one study conducted by Judith Clark, a researcher and long-term prisoner within one of California's maximum-security prisons. She analyzed the way the prison environment influenced incarcerated mothers' relationship with their children as well as their sense of identity as mothers. In her own experience, she noted, "the sense of myself as a mother was key to my sanity" (Clark 1995). Clark found that women participated in a mothering subculture within the prison. Mothers could bond over discussion of their children. They could share fears together and receive support from the greater inmate community. Moreover, it allowed women to see themselves as something other than a prisoner; they were still human beings with an important role in society. While the identity of a mother provides incarcerated women with a positive self-image other than that of "prisoner," the environment of a female prison undermines the qualities that make a successful mother. Autonomy and a sense of responsibility are necessary traits of strong and positive mother. However, these qualities are contrary to the image of an ideal female prisoner. The prison system expects women to be submissive and diminutive. Independence and assertiveness are particularly unacceptable qualities for female prisoners because the system sees them as "wayward children" rather than independent adults (Clark 1995). This status influences a woman's perception of herself. If the "adults" (the prison officials) around her treat her as a naughty

child, she will ultimately internalize that role. Clark noted that within the prison women would act like young children, throwing tantrums, whining, and falling into fits of giggles. Conversely, when their children would come to visit, these same women would adopt an adult facade to cover-up their return to immaturity and present themselves in an adult manner to their children. These women would keep their face stern and refuse to play with their children during family visits. Ultimately, the influence of the prison system on an incarcerated mother's psyche leads to the deterioration of a healthy mother-child relationship.

From Clark's study, it is clear that for women to maintain their mothering role while in the prison, the prison itself must provide an environment where the women can perceive themselves as fully functioning adults. To this end, incarcerated women need access to work and educational programs. When asked what types of programs would most benefit their children, a group of American prisoners responded that they would benefit from programs that help the mother succeed when released and programs that strengthen mother-child relationships (Sharp 2008: 18).

Some countries do offer such programs, especially those designed to help incarcerated mothers form and maintain healthy bonds with their children. Within the United States there are programs which allow mothers to visit their children on weekends, summer camp programs for children of incarcerated mothers, special playrooms for child visits, educational programs which teach incarcerated mother important parenting skills, and many more (Clark 1995). These programs not only improve the prison experience for the incarcerated mother by offering her support and guidance, they also have been found to lower recidivism rates a great degree, from 19% in the general population to only 1% of women who completed the programs (Hoffman, Byrd, and Kightlinger 2009: 400). The existence of such programs offer hope to those with a desire to help incarcerated mothers, but in order for them to be truly effective, organizations and prison institutions

must implement them in a wider range of prisons.

### *Children of Prisoners*

To understand the issue of mother in prison, one must have some information on the way maternal imprisonment affects the innocent children who find themselves without a mother. For all children, young and older, contact with family members is crucial to healthy development (Luyt 2008: 318). This presents a problem when one or both of the child's parents are in prison. Children of prisoners display higher levels of social, emotional, and educational problems than children in the general population. Such problems include aggressive and anti-social behavior, sleeping difficulties, eating problems, delinquency, and running away (Luyt 2008: 320). These negative effects remain even after controlling for factors like abuse, neglect, residential instability, parental substance abuse, and poverty Hoffman, Byrd, and Kightlinger 2009: 398). As discussed above, maternal imprisonment disrupts family life more than paternal imprisonment, meaning that maternal imprisonment would impact more harshly on child development than paternal imprisonment.

### *The South African Prison System*

Before I look at the literature surrounding incarcerated mothers specifically within South Africa, I will offer a slight overview of the South African prison system post-1994. South Africa maintains one of the largest prison systems in the world, holding prisoners in 240 prisons scattered around the country (Sloth-Nielsen 2007: 381). After the fall of the apartheid government, South Africa took large steps in an attempt to reconstruct the prison system. The government demilitarized the institution, stripping Department of Correctional Service members of their military rank and uniforms (Sloth-Nielsen 2007: 380). In quick succession, the South African government implemented the 1994 White Paper on Corrections, the 1998 Correctional Services Act, the 2005 White paper on Corrections, and the 2008 Correctional Services

Amendment Act. Each of these bodies of legislation and policy built upon the others to incorporate constitutional principles and international guidelines into the DCS system. Most recently, the Correctional Services Amendment Act of 2008 went so far as to change the vocabulary of prison life. “Prisons” no longer exist, instead they have been replaced by the friendlier term “Correctional Centers” where “inmates” rather than “prisoners” are offered a variety of programs which will correct their offending behavior and rehabilitate them (Department of Correctional Services 2008). However, despite the new terminology and proclaimed emphasis on rehabilitation, W. F. M. Luyt argues that prison conditions have worsened since the birth of South Africa's democracy (2008: 300). He points to issues of overcrowding and lack of rehabilitation programs as the most devastating faults of the current prison system.

To the credit of the Department of Correctional Services, it has acknowledged the importance of creating sub-systems within the larger prison system, which deal specifically with the issues of women in prison. In 2009 the DCS stated, “Despite the seemingly low numbers of women who are in the DCS facilities, challenges faced by women are unique and require a special approach” (27). One of those unique approaches appears in the Correctional Services Amendment Act of 2005, which establishes an obligation on the part of the DCS to incarcerate female inmates as close to their homes as possible, “especially if they are mothers” (DCS 2005: 163). The DCS website includes women inmates as a target group requiring increased access to psychological treatment. On paper, the DCS runs programs that deal with life skills building and family and marriage enrichment, putting them up to standard with programs in the United States and Britain. However, policy and reality often look very different from one another. We will now

turn to the research that looks at the reality of women within the South African prison system.

### *Incarcerated Mothers in South Africa*

In South Africa, the female inmate population is very small compared with international standards. In 2007, women made up only 2.1% of the inmate population and the numbers have not increased dramatically since then (Luyt 2008:304). Despite the lower percentage of women, the proportion of mothers remains high. Estimates range from about 70% (Luyt 2008: 311) to almost 85% of women in prison have children (Sloth-Nielsen 2005). Whichever statistics you look at, the fact remains that most of the women in South African prisons are mothers. These women face the same difficulties as incarcerated mother throughout the world, but their issues are exacerbated by a system that is still riddled with problems.

One of the largest complaints from incarcerated mothers is lack of contact with their children. When women enter prison they have to make the difficult decision of where to leave their children. The majority of women put their children in the care of family members or friends rather than entrusting them to the care of the state or their fathers (Sloth-Nielsen 2005). Giving up one's child, even for a short period, can be a stressful experience. Mother come to prison with a fear that their children might forget about them while they are away, and the only thing that can alleviate that fear is communication with their child. Unfortunately, communication while in prison is particularly difficult. In one South African study, 95% of participants indicated that they had lost contact with their children after imprisonment. The same percentage said they did not receive visits from their children for a variety of reasons including the high cost of transportation and hostility of DCS members (Luyt 2008: 319). Another study found that one-third of female inmates had not seen their children since the beginning of their incarceration and one-tenth saw

their children only once a year (Haffejee, Vetten, and Greyling 2006: 3). Even for women who maintain contact with their children, prison visits fail to provide the necessary environment or time for mother-child bonding. Visitations are limited to only 40 minutes to an hour and are often shorter to allow for more visitors (Luyt 2008:318). Visits often occur in a public space, which limits the nature of discussions. The prisons also lack facilities for mothers and children to play together during visits, even in instances when children are allowed physical contact with their mothers (Haffejee, Vetten and Greyling 2006: 3). Given the difficulties of visitations and contact with children, it is hardly surprising that incarcerated mothers report having a “forced relationship” with their children rather than a natural one (Luyt 2008: 320).

Perhaps even more discouraging is the experience women face when they leave prison and are unable to regain contact with their children. In the South African system, even temporary imprisonment of the mother can lead to permanent separation of mother and child. Many mothers find that if their children have entered the realm of state care it is nearly impossible to regain custody (Luyt 2008: 316). This reality imposes a great deal of strain on imprisoned mothers and forces them to make difficult decisions regarding the care of their children, forcing them to sometimes temporarily abandon their families rather than entrust them to the care of the state.

### *Mother-Child Prison Units*

Nothing can be more horrifying for a woman than entering prison while pregnant. The fear of giving birth in shackles and having your newborn baby torn from your arms and deposited in a state institution far away from you must be crippling. Similarly, the first year of life is an important stage for children. It is of paramount importance that a child bonds with an

adult figure during that first year because that attachment forms the building blocks for the child's capacity to love, trust, feel secure, and develop self-esteem (Eloffand Moen 2003: 712). Fortunately, the majority of countries allow incarcerated women to keep their babies with them in prison up to a certain age, particularly if the women are pregnant at the time of their incarceration (United Nations 2008: 21). According to the Correctional Services Amendment Act of 2008, incarcerated mothers in South Africa may keep their children in prison with them until the child reaches two years of age. The Act also maintains that a special unit should exist where these mothers and children can live. On August 18, 2011, the DCS opened the first model Mother and Child Unit attached to the Pollsmoor prison. The new unit addresses the issues of deprivation for children imprisoned with their mothers and attempts to mitigate the negative effects of prison life. It contains a medical facility, a kitchen so mothers can prepare baby-friendly meals, a nursery, and an outdoor play area. This unit is the first of its kind in South Africa and the Correctional Services Minister plans to establish three more facilities in the coming years (Department of Correctional Services 2011).

Within each country and the international community, professionals as well as average citizens debate the existence of these units. Some argue that mother and child units benefit the psychological health of both mother and child, like Allison Ford who wrote an analysis of mother-child units within US prisons. She found that women involved in the programs had much lower recidivism rates than the general inmate population. She also argues that these units are beneficial for healthy child development as well because children separated from their mothers due to maternal incarceration are more likely to be arrested, drop out of school, and develop emotional disorders (Ford 2010). A study conducted in South Africa on the Pretoria Female

Prison mirrors these results. Inmates allowed to keep their children with them in prison had a much lower recidivism rate, only 8-9% compared with the 18% of women who return to prison from outside the mother-child units (Eloff and Moen 2003: 712). These results indicate that, in theory at least, mother and child units within prison are a valid and helpful solution to the issue of inmates with infants.

As with the disjuncture between policy and practice, theoretical conclusions often fall short when applied to real situations, including the issue of mother and child units. While they seem beneficial in theory, the reality of mother and child units undermines the positive effects of the mother-child bond. Prisons are not child-friendly places. Eloff and Moen conducted a study of the Mother and Child Unit in Pretoria Female Prison in 2003. They found that children lack the necessary stimulus to foster positive mental growth, they have to share a small bed with their mothers, and they are subject to lock-down at 14:30 just like the adult inmates (714-717).

Although the White Paper on Corrections indicates that all mother and child units should have a crèche for childhood development, The South African Human Rights Commission visited mother-child units across the country in 1998 and found that the vast majority lacked any special facilities for children. The children had to “sit idle with their mothers the whole day” (34).

Additionally, the prison environment limits the types of interaction between a mother and her child, therefore making it difficult for the pair to bond even when living together. Due to the large number of people in the area, children form no specific attachment with their mother (Eloff and Moen 2003: 717). While the theoretical implications of mother and child units indicate positive childhood development and the creation of healthy bonds, the reality within South African prisons fails to meet that standard.

Although governments and NGOs are beginning to implement policies that address the specific issues of incarcerated women and mothers, these policies fall short, both internationally and within South Africa. Despite these policies, incarcerated mothers complain of lack of contact with their children, which harms the psychological development of both mother and innocent child and the steps taken to prevent mother-child separation, namely mother and child units within prisons, ultimately might undermine their goal. Given the lack of widespread, practical and beneficial solutions to the concerns of incarcerated mothers, the conversation must continue in the coming years.

## **Methodology**

In South Africa, it is very difficult for a researcher to gain access to prisons. The Department of Correctional Services severely limits research within the prisons. Therefore, I completed this study as an attachment to Phoenix Zululand, a restorative justice program working within multiple prisons within Zululand. Phoenix is a non-governmental organization that leads a number of specific programs with inmates. The programs address issues of self-esteem, conflict resolution, environmental understanding, and family reconciliation and bonding. It works under the mandate of the 2004 White Paper on Corrections, which maintains that “the participation of the community in strengthening and enhancing rehabilitation is crucial” and that “entry into the Department for purposes of rendering services must be regulated yet made easy.”

My methodology took two main paths: sessions with a group of female inmates and interviews.

### *Methodology A: “Starting with Us” Sessions*

During the two-week period that I lived in Eshowe, I attended seven sessions of Phoenix's

program, “Starting with Us,” a program which aspires to develop self-awareness and skills for living within the participants. This program is the first that inmates can complete with Phoenix and allows them to continue with other Phoenix programs and potentially becoming a peer facilitator (an inmate that leads programs within the prison). The whole program consists of 15 sessions, which take place over a period of up to six weeks. Usually the participants meet for an hour or two each morning and complete one session a day. Each session deals with a different issue, including the stages of grief, controlling emotions, dealing with conflict, and restoring relationships.

For my first week in the prison, November 1-November 4, I attended the introductory session and the beginning sessions entitled, “Ourselves/ Our Stories” and “Being in Prison.” In each of these sessions, I participated in a fashion similar to the female inmates. I shared my own stories when asked particular questions and contributed to the discussions, but I did not lead the group in any defining way. I explained to the women in the first session why I was there and what I would be doing. I also asked them if they would feel comfortable with me taking notes during the session and assured them that they could tell me if there was anything they did not want me to write down. I also told them that I would not use their names in either my paper or my notes.<sup>1</sup> They acknowledged that they understood and said that it would be fine if I took notes. During each of these first three sessions I took notes in a notebook. Each afternoon when we returned from the prison I would type up my notes and add anything I had not written down at the time. From these sessions, I gathered background information about the women and established a rapport with them.

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1 To this end, I referred to each of the women in terms of their hairstyle on the first day of the program (Long Braids, Short Hair, Blonde Streak, etc). I felt that this was a safe way to maintain their anonymity as each woman changed her hair at least once during the two-week period I spent with them.

I began to lead sessions my second week in the prison. The typical “Starting with Us” program contains one session devoted to the issue of parenting, specifically the difficulties of parenting while in prison. As part of my research, I expanded this session to cover a period of four days, from November 8 to November 11. Using the original session as a guideline, I designed these sessions as a period of discussion where I would ask questions for personal reflection and for my research purposes.<sup>2</sup> I personally led these sessions, with the translation help of Nonceba Lushaba, the director of Phoenix Zululand.

My group for “Starting with Us” consisted of five female inmates, all mothers, and a peer-facilitator who was also a mother. Each of these women had children outside prison. The sessions lasted anywhere from 45 minutes to two hours, depending on how strict the DCS members were feeling on that particular day. Overall, I spent about ten hours with the group of incarcerated mothers.

#### *Methodology B: Interviews*

In addition to leading sessions on parenting with the women in Eshowe Correctional Center, I conducted a series of interviews. My first interview was with an incarcerated mother who had her baby with her in the prison. This interview took place on November 1, my first day in the prison. The interview was largely informal. After I explained to her the reason for my research and asked if she would feel comfortable speaking with me, we sat side-by-side in the waiting room of the prison and talked about her experience as a mother who gave birth while incarcerated. As the DCS prohibits the use of recording devices in the prison, I recorded her answers in writing.

I also conducted three more formal interviews. I interviewed the social worker from

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix I for a full outline of the “Starting with Us” sessions.

Community Corrections, a division within the DCS, a social worker within the Department of Correctional Services, and a former inmate and current Phoenix facilitator who dealt with the issues I wanted to explore. I consider these interviews more formal because I had a set list of questions, I recorded each of these interviews and they took place in a more formal area (the offices of the social workers and a restaurant). Each of these interviews lasted about an hour. Before each of these formal interviews, I explained the nature of my study and asked the interviewee to read and sign an informed consent form. None of them expressed a problem with the interview or the nature of my study.

### **Limitations of the Study**

As with any study, my research project had a number of limitations, namely time, language, prison rules and environment, and cultural differences.

Time was a big issue in this study. I was only in Eshowe for two weeks and my time within the prison was limited. Generally, Phoenix can only run programs Tuesday-Thursday, as the prison is often understaffed around the weekend and therefore stricter about visitors. We were lucky in that we had access to the prison both of the Fridays during my field-study period. However, even with access to the prison four days a week, I felt that I did not have enough time with the inmates. Each of our sessions were limited to less than two hours, sometimes less than an hour, meaning that our discussions were often cut off before their natural end. Originally, we had hoped for two sessions a day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, but because of a music program within the prison, we were limited to only morning sessions. I suppose every researcher feels that they could research a topic forever and only just skim the surface of the issue, and given that my research period was only two weeks long, I actually gathered a lot of

information.

The second limitation I encountered was the language barrier. All the women in the group were isiZulu speakers. Most of them understood a little English, but they felt much more comfortable speaking in isiZulu. During our first meeting, Nonceba and the peer-facilitator encouraged the women to speak in English whenever possible for my benefit, but that rarely happened. Nonceba and Lamo both acted as wonderful translators, but even the best of translations lose some meaning. Translations also made it impossible for me to record exact quotes from the women during most of the sessions because Nonceba and Lamo gave me the general meaning of their comments rather than a word-for-word translation. On many occasions, I left the prison with the distinct feeling that I would have understood a lot more of what transpired if I spoke isiZulu.

The prison rules presented another deterrent to my research. Understandably, prisons are weary of visitors and keep a watchful eye on any unusual activity. They have rules prohibiting the use of recording equipment and cameras as well as rules about when we could enter the facility and when we had to leave. These limited the kind of information I could gather as I could not record the sessions and instead had to rely on my handwritten notes. The DCS members were in control of our sessions. They could come over at any point in the session and tell us it was time to leave, or they could let us carry on until we reached the end of our activities for the day. The prison environment also limited the type of information I could gather. While we were usually in a private room for our sessions, sometimes we had to hold our meetings outside in the courtyard. This made conversation, particularly personal conversation, difficult because other people, inmates as well as DCS members, were in close proximity.

Finally, cultural differences presented an issue. I call them cultural differences for lack of a better description. What I mean is that the women were reluctant to discuss certain issues. Sometimes it was almost painful to pull answers out, meaning that our “discussions” were more in the form of answering a question around in the circle rather than engaging with one another. This was very different from my experience when I went to a “Starting with Us” graduation in the male section of Eshowe Correctional Center. The men were much more assertive and willing to voice their opinions.

I have my own opinions of the criminal justice system, many rooted in my understanding of the system in the United States. I do not agree that imprisonment effectively reduces criminal behavior and feel that it rather reproduces criminality by forcing individuals to live separate from society and forever carry a black mark on their record. While my biases might not hold true in the South African context, I cannot sever them from myself. Therefore, I entered this project with a bias against the prison system. Although I tried not to let this affect my work, I must acknowledge its presence before I can discuss my findings with a clear(er) conscience.

## **Results**

### ***Mothers in Prison***

This first section will look at information gathered regarding mothers in Eshowe Correctional Facility. What are their main concerns? How do they feel about being mothers? What coping methods do they use to deal with the stress of separation from their children? It will highlight the contradictions between what the women say about their understanding of motherhood and their lived experience of being an incarcerated mother.

There were five participants and one peer-facilitator in the “Starting with Us” sessions.

The women were quite young, all but one were between the ages of 22 and 24 and the eldest turned 31 during the program. All six of these women were mothers who had children living outside the prison facilities. The women had either one or two children on average, although one woman had been caring for five children at the time of her arrest. The average age of their children was only six years. The women were incarcerated for various crimes, most commonly shoplifting, but also fraud and assault. Two of the women said this was their first time in prison and two said it was their third time.

When women go to prison, they face the difficult process of placing their child into the care of another person. They usually have three valid options: entrust their children in the care of an extended family member, put their children into a state institution or foster home, or abandon their children and hope they will be able to care for themselves. External circumstances usually dictate what will happen with the child regardless of the mother's preference. A social worker at Community Corrections lamented the difficulty of this process, "The external family support structure is usually broken. You don't find a family member who is willing or who is keen to take the children to be with her." In order to understand fully the difficulty of this situation, one must look at the factor of time. These women do not have time to sit down and have a conversation with their family about what will happen with their children. Upon arrest, they are taken immediately into custody and might not be able to communicate with the outside world for a few weeks. During that time, they have to trust that someone will step in and take responsibility of their children. One participant spoke of her arrest. She never addressed the issue with her mother because she did not want to tell her mother that she engaged in illegal activities. When she was arrested, she just had to trust that her mother would take care of her children "because she is that

kind of person.” What would have happened if she and her children had not been living with her mother at the time of her arrest? “I would have gone insane. More than I was when I was in prison knowing that my mom was going to look after my kids. But I was a mess. But I think what really happens to women, they start to stress over things because they know that no one is really there to look after their kids.”

Within the “Starting with Us” group, the vast majority had left their children with family members. Some of the children were staying with the inmate's sibling, mother, grandmother, and one woman had left her children in the care of their paternal grandparents. Only one woman, NE<sup>3</sup>, lacked an external support system to provide for her children. When NE was arrested, she was caring for not only her eight-year-old son, but also the four children of her deceased sister. She had not been able to find someone else to care for them and now they are in the care of the eldest child, age 22.

Despite their worries about their children, all but one of the women said that they were happy about their children's caregivers. Many said that they were happy because they knew that their children would be well cared for while they were in prison. The only major issue arose with one of the women, LB.<sup>4</sup>

### *Thoughts on Motherhood*

In your culture, when is a woman ready to be a mother? I posed this question to the women during our first session on motherhood. “When a man has paid lobola (the bride price) and when they are married,” one woman answered. Many of the inmates agreed that women are ready to be mothers when they are married. Another woman spoke of the traditions within Zulu

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3 Initials have been changed to protect the anonymity of the women.

4 I discuss this issue more under the sub-heading “Common Worries.”

culture that prepare a woman to become a mother. She described the symbolic rite of passage where a woman is granted a key that 'unlocks' her passage to maturity and allows her to marry and have children. Only one woman presented a more practical understanding of motherhood, "When you've given birth to a child, that's when you're ready to be a mother." It is fascinating that these women put so much significance on marriage in relation to motherhood given that most of them were unmarried and had little or no relationship with the father of their children. It hints that perhaps they realize that they were not ready to become mothers when they gave birth to their children.

Later in that same session, the women talked about what makes a good mother. They touched on traits like the ability to love and discipline a child, but more commonly they emphasized the importance of "taking care of your child's needs." The consensus seemed to be that a good mother was one who could properly care for her child and provide financial support. One woman said, "A good mother is one who can make sure her child has enough food so he doesn't go to someone else asking them to take care of him." Similarly, they agreed, "a bad mother is one who discards of her child." They also spoke about the importance of being a mother. One woman said that it is important to be a mother because it fills a necessary role in the community. She said that every homestead needs a mother figure to give it standing and prestige. Other women agreed that it is good to be a mother because it allows you to show others what it means to be responsible and take care of another human being. They all said that one of the good things about being a mother is "loving your child." I asked them how important their children are to them. They all said their children were very important. Some put the importance of their children on a continuum with the rest of their family members, saying their children were just as

important as or more important than their own mothers. Most adamantly said that they did not want to have any more children, despite their insistence that their children were the most important part of their lives. Two of the women even said they were taking steps to ensure that it would be biologically impossible for them to have any more children. Only one of the women said she did want to have another child. She said that she has always mothered at a distance, often leaving her two children in the care of other family members, and she wants the opportunity to raise a child on her own. She seemed to want a chance to get motherhood right, to raise a child in an ideal way. These discussions again show that the women had a perception of motherhood their mind that did not match their experiences of mothering. They spoke about one of the cornerstones of motherhood as providing financial responsibility for one's child, but they themselves were unable to provide for their children and had to become “bad mothers” by essentially abandoning their children.

Although the women did not themselves voice an understanding of the disjuncture between their ideas of motherhood and their experiences, they did speak of how they wanted to change as a mother when they left prison. “I realize it is more useful to be close to my children. I spent too much time in town, too much time stealing, when I should have been with my child.” Many of the women in the group echoed this sentiment; they all want to spend more time with their children once they are released and felt guilty that they did not take advantage of the time they had with their children prior to incarceration. This sentiment indicates that the women see themselves as having partially failed as mothers because they neglected their children in the past and now want to make up for it. One woman said she wanted to spend more time with elderly people after her release so she could ask them for advice about how to be a better mother.

Through our conversations about motherhood, it became clear that these women see themselves as partially lacking in terms of being a mother. They have an image in their mind of a “good” mother and their lived experiences do not match up to that ideal. None of the women actually said that she thought she had failed as a mother or said she felt she was a bad mother, but they all discussed feeling guilty because they were not able to care for their children and had taken them for granted in the past. It was clear that incarceration had not changed their ideals of motherhood and they had not created a new sense of what it meant to be a mother while in prison. The disjuncture between their ideas of motherhood and their experiences meant that the women felt guilty and inadequate, hardly an outlook conducive to promote healthy mother-child relationships.

#### *Common Worries*

The women expressed many worries about their children that overlapped into two categories, financial concerns and unease about the type of care their children received.

A social worker at the DCC first mentioned the prevalence of financial concerns:

Sometimes we get letters from the schools or else the mothers initiate and ask us to write to the principals and explain the situation, that they are in prison and they are sentenced for how long and their children have no one to care for them. Because if they are in the correctional center the social grant is stopped. It is for the children, but if the person receiving the grant is in custody, she can't collect the grant. She needs somebody else who is in the community to take over the grant and take care of the children and see to it that their educational and basic needs are met. So sometimes it becomes a problem, especially when the support structure is not available.

The women in the prison named these exact same concerns. They worry that no one will pay school fees so their children will attend bad schools. They fear that there will not be enough money for new school uniforms. When I asked the women to talk about how their incarceration affects their children, many of them mentioned financial difficulties as one of the main ways

their absence will harm their children. With the holidays coming up, one woman was particularly worried that no one would buy special food to make the holidays festive.

The women also discussed the worries they felt about what type of care their children would receive while they were in prison. In earlier sessions, the women had said that they were happy with their children's caretakers, but in later sessions, they continuously mentioned a fear that their children would lack proper care and they would not know anything about it. A former inmate put it this way, "I knew my mom was there, but I know my mom couldn't do the same job that I do to my kids, you know?" More than an actual fear that something terrible would happen to their children, the women spoke of a nagging worry that stemmed from lack of regular contact. They would often wonder: Have my children eaten today? Have they bathed? An assignment asked the women to draw the feelings of their children and one of the women left the feet and ears of her child uncolored. When asked why she had not colored his feet and ears, she said it was because she did not know whether he was clean or dirty and therefore did not know what color to use. These worries all came from separation and lack of communication between mothers and children. While the women might trust the people with whom their children are living, they still worry because they cannot be *sure* that everything is actually fine.

A few women expressed worry about the health of their children. SH's daughter has asthma and SH worries that her current caregivers will be unable to notice the warning signs of an attack. LB also spoke of her children's health as a major concern. While she was in prison, she learned that her daughter had been hospitalized and had an emergency operation to remove fluid from her heart. LB is also worried about the physical safety of her daughter. LB grew up in a children's home and only when to live with her mother when she was 17 years old. That year,

while under her mother's care, she was raped and had a child. At the time of her arrest, LB lived with her young daughter in her mother's house and her son lived with her sister in Durban. Since her incarceration, her children have remained in the homes they lived in prior to their mother's incarceration. LB feels positively about the situation for her son; she thinks that her sister will care for him well. However, she is very worried about the safety of her daughter. On numerous occasions, LB said that her mother is not a good caregiver because she abuses alcohol. "It is an abusive situation," she said. On the final day of sessions, LB spoke of a deep fear that her daughter will be raped while under the care of LB's mother. She is especially worried as the holiday season approaches because her mother will drink more during the holidays and fail to pay attention to the safety of LB's daughter. A social worker with the Department of Correctional Services (DCS) spoke of this frightening phenomenon and the way it affects an inmate's psyche,

Especially for the females who have children who are girls, they are not safe if their parents are not around. There are a number of cases where the children have been abused, sexually. And if you see that happened, if your child is being abused while you are still in prison, you will feel that if you were around, your child would be safe and you will end up blaming yourself for that event.

LB spoke to a social worker and a psychologist who consults at the prison hoping that someone would intervene and move her daughter to a safer environment or allow her an early parole, but the social worker had done nothing to remedy the situation or implement the recommendations of the psychologist when I left the prison.

Most of these worries stem from lack of adequate contact with their children. If the women could communicate with their children on a regular basis, they might feel more at ease about their children's daily needs. Understanding that the current prison system attempts to both reform and punish inmates for their misdeeds, constant contact with the external world is an unlikely solution. However, the social workers I interviewed both spoke of a need for programs

that investigate the living conditions of inmates' children. The social worker with DCS said that he had personally investigated cases where women claimed the caregivers were mistreating their children. However, the DCS has other concerns and cannot necessarily investigate the living situation of every child. Employees have to remain in the prison and cannot travel around the country. "We rely on programs like Phoenix because they can go out and interact with the community." (Social Worker Comm Corr). While she misunderstood the actual nature of Phoenix programs (they do not investigate the living conditions of children), the social worker with Comm Corr made it clear that the Department has a need for external programs which have the freedom to investigate the living conditions of inmates' children and report back to the inmates directly. Knowing that someone regularly checked on their children and reported their findings directly to the mothers would greatly reduce inmates' worries about their children.

#### *Communication*

"People find it so difficult to visit their relatives in prison. So people in prison don't see their relatives until they are released" (Social Worker Comm Corr). This was true for the women in "Starting with Us." Only a few of the women had visits from family members, but the majority had not seen their children since before their incarceration. Some of the women said their children did not visit because the prison is too far away from their homes, other said family does not visit because they do not know the woman is in prison. For those lucky few who had visits from family members, the visits themselves could be stressful situations. The DCS considers family visits privileges, meaning officials can grant or take away visitation rights depending on the behavior of a particular inmate. "The A Group, they have the privilege of meeting their visitors for 45 minutes per day on the visitation days. Then for the B Groups I

think it is 30 minutes for them” (Social Worker DCS). That means the maximum amount of time an incarcerated mother could spend with her children would be 45 minutes a week, hardly the necessary time to develop or maintain a healthy relationship. A social worker at DCS acknowledged this, “it's not so much a mother-child relationship to see the child 45 minutes in a week. That must be very stressful.”

Beyond the time limitations for visits, the visitation facilities leave much to be desired. If an inmate is part of B Group, the prison denies them all contact visits; instead, they see their children from the other side of a glass wall. “I used to speak with them and they were on the other side. So there are holes in the glass where you can talk with them. Then after six months, I was given an A, then I will go around and sit with that. So that only happens after you are in six months and good behavior and all that” (former inmate). Even the visits themselves present a difficulty for inmates.

If women do not see their children while they are in prison, do they do anything else to stay in communication? The women in “Starting with Us” agreed that telephone calls are the only option to stay in contact with their family. The former inmate said, “Telephonically, that was the only way I could communicate with them. Otherwise, other than that, there was absolutely nothing else.” Many of the women relied on phone calls as the only way to contact their children. Some of the women in the group did not even have the luxury of phone calls because they did not know a number where they could reach their family or did not have enough money for phone cards. One of the women had absolutely no contact with her children since the beginning of her incarceration five months before. Since she did not have their contact information, the only way she could communicate with them would be through a social worker with the DCS, but the social

worker had not responded to her request for information.

Lack of communication leads to stress and worry and causes the mothers to doubt their relationship with their children. Even though she called her children as often as each weekend, the former inmate said that it was impossible to maintain the type of relationship she had with her children when she was out of prison and she had to work very hard to reestablish that relationship after her release.

It is clear that these women need some sort of program to facilitate contact between themselves and their children. The social worker with Comm Corr said the best indicator of a successful reentry into society is whether an inmate had regular visits from family members. “The women I have seen doing good were the ones who saw their boyfriends or husbands while they were in prison. Then they got out and their boyfriends supported them and they got married and raised children. And the children are normal children, just like any others in the community.” If family contact has such a great effect on inmates, why are there no programs that help establish that contact? Apparently, such a program used to exist. “NICRO used to provide that opportunity. They used to organize on buses to travel to a prison a little bit far away, but unfortunately NICRO was running out of funds to fund that program.” (Social Worker DCS). Phoenix also provides this service to a certain extent. It covers transportation cost for family members of inmates who participate in the program “Conversations with Families” which culminates in a family conference where the family members come to the prison. However, that program does not even begin to cover the need for contact between mothers and children.

### *Coping Methods*

With all the stress of separation and worries about their children, I wanted to discover

whether these women had developed any strategies to deal with the pain of their situation. The women said that when they felt sad they would read the Bible or look at family photographs and try to have hope for the future. Another common strategy involved sleeping to block out all the pain. During one session, the peer-facilitator asked the women if they like nighttime or daytime better in the prison. Most of the women said they prefer the night because they are able to sleep and forget about all their problems and fears.

The women all agreed that talking about their problems with other people did not help. The former inmate said, “When I was sad it never helped me to talk to other people... Whatever pain I had I never used to share it. I would read or write in a diary. It helped to talk about it in writing. I knew that no one could help ease that pain, so I wrote it down.” I asked the rest of the women in the group if they agreed with that statement and they all nodded their heads. “It's better to keep quiet,” they said. These women feared talking about their personal issues with others because they worried that other women in the prison would not take their pain seriously and might laugh at them or make a joke out of their situation.

Ultimately, I found that these women had not developed any methods to deal with the pain they experienced from their separation from their children. Some of them used diaries for catharsis, but many simply escaped the pain through sleep. Despite the prevalence of mothers in Eshowe Correctional Facility, the women did not discuss their feelings with each other; they each dealt with their suffering in isolation. Hopefully, the women will be able to discuss their problems with the “Starting with Us” group and find ways to comfort each other. This lack of communal support within the prison makes it clear that the prison should implement some sort of therapy or support group. The DCS prides itself on “rehabilitation,” but rehabilitation programs

will not work if an inmate is in a constant state of worry and pain. In order to help these women, NGOs or the DCS needs to provide professional support for their emotional needs.

### *Thoughts about Release*

Not only does prison place a severe strain on incarcerated mothers while they are imprisoned, it continues to affect their life even when they leave. First, they must regain custody of their children. This could include tracking them down if they have moved since the incarceration, taking steps with the government to remove the children from state care, or even legal battles. The social worker with DCS said that sometimes women are unable to get their children back after their release from prison. “The problem is when the agreement was a gentleman's agreement. That is when you say, 'I'll take care of your child because you are my sister.’ And when you get out I will tell you, 'You are an offender, why do you want to take care? What are you going to teach the children?’” He said that these women are unable to regain custody of their children, despite the legal basis for their claim. “Our Act in South Africa states very clearly that when one parent is deceased, the remaining parent has the full right to take care of the child.... So by law those offenders have the rights to win the custody of the child. But unfortunately they lack that knowledge and they turn to give up on getting custody of the child.” Clearly, inmates need a program that can teach them their legal rights regarding custody issues.

Custody issues are only the first step for inmates upon their release, the next step is the difficult process of rebuilding a strong relationship with their children. The women had mixed feelings about returning to their children. While they said they felt happy about going back to their families, many also expressed fear that their children would be disappointed in them and that they would have lost all authority. “Maybe it shift the minds of my children, you know. Our

mother was teaching us this thing and now she is doing the opposite thing” (former inmate). The former inmate said that the most important step to take with children is to restore their trust, which one can only achieve through complete honesty. The women agreed that they wanted to restore trust and they would do that by spending lots of time with their children and being honest with them.

One of the biggest questions for the women in my group was whether they should tell their children the truth about their incarceration. In the group of six women, half had not told their children that they were in prison and planned to keep their incarceration a secret. SH told her five-year-old daughter that she was in college rather than tell her that SH was in prison. She maintained the lie even when her daughter came to visit her in the glass-separated visitation facilities. Other women tell their children that they are working and cannot come home because the boss is very strict. Within our group, some of the women thought this was a good option. They said their children were too young to understand fully what it meant to be in prison and they worried that their children would see them differently if they told the truth, “They will see you as a hardened criminal rather than their mother.” Others worried about their ruined reputation if their child told other people in the neighborhood.

The other half of the group maintained that it is very important to tell children the truth. LB said she wanted to tell her children the truth because she thought they would find out anyway and it would be better if it came from her. She also feared that if she told them she had been working she would be trapped in a lie for the rest of her life. In our last meeting, I asked the group if there was anything else they wanted to discuss. LB brought up the issue of telling the truth again. She said it always better to tell the truth. The former inmate explained how she told

her children the truth. “It was very hard to explain over the phone, but I just arranged with her so she could come over the weekend to visit me so that I can find a way to explain. It was a terrible place anyway to explain what you have done to your children, but I told them. Even my little one.” Despite her insistence that mothers in prison should share their true location with their children, she understands how difficult it is for women to overcome the fear of rejection from their children and their communities.

It is interesting that although the women all expressed a desire to rebuild their relationships with their children and regain their children's trust; only half of them thought they would tell their children the truth about their incarceration. The rest of the women wanted to keep it a secret that they spent time in prison. Just as they did not voice the discrepancy between their ideas of motherhood and their experience of motherhood, the women did not seem to realize the contradiction in an attempt to restore trust coupled with a giant lie about their criminal background. As previously mentioned, this indicates the need for women to develop a new understanding of motherhood that incorporated their experiences in prison. If women could reconcile their incarceration with their image of motherhood, they would be more likely to be open with their children. I agree that truth is always the best option, but one cannot force these women to tell their children the truth because they fear rejection from their children. They must learn that they can be both an inmate and a good mother before one can reasonable expect them to share the truth with their children.

### ***Mother and Child Unit***

This second section will look at the specific issues regarding the mother and child unit in Eshowe Correctional Facility. It will address some of the physical issues with the facility as well

as the way the prison environment affects the unit. According to the DCS Amendment Act of 2008, female inmates with babies are allowed to bring their children into prison with them until the child is two-years-old. This is supposed to address issues of maternal-infant bonding as well as the more practical concern of where to send the babies of inmates if there is no one to care for them. I spoke with one woman in the mother and child unit in Eshowe Correctional Center. She was pregnant when she entered custody and gave birth while incarcerated. She decided to keep her daughter with her because she had nowhere else to send her. The mother's parents had died and she had virtually no extended family that could care for her infant child. She said she was happy that her daughter was in prison with her because “they give me everything I need for a baby.” This indicated that her happiness came from her daughter's physical comfort; she had clothes, food, and shelter at no expense to the incarcerated mother. The social worker with Comm Corr also mentioned this physical care as a benefit for babies born to incarcerated mothers. “The child is cared for and the mother is able to look after her child. They get a food ration. I think for mothers with babies it is better that way because these children they bring a long with them, they know they have food to eat and a bath and they are safe.” The social worker mentioned the two main concerns of women separated from their children due to incarceration: adequate food and cleanliness.

### *The Physical Space*

In Eshowe, the mother and child unit is separated from the rest of the facility. At the entrance a sign read, “Special Care Unit: Mothers with Babies,” which indicates that something about this area should be different from the rest of the prison. Despite the mandate that mother and child units should focus on “the normalisation of the environment in order to promote the

child's physical and emotional development and care” (DCS 2005:164), the facilities are severely lacking. “I would say it is not quite nice. It is not user friendly to those babies and those mothers.” (Social Worker Comm Corr). Each mother and baby pair have their own room which contains a bed for the mother, a crib for the baby, a sink, a toilet, and a shelf. The social worker at Comm Corr was appalled by the conditions, “they have a facility, but they have nothing that is expected in a mother and child unit. It is only that they are separated from the other women who do not have children.” Currently, the facility contains no toys for the children. The “playroom” contains only a television, which the women had to request specifically in order to give their children a picture of the outside world. During the day, the babies can wander around the courtyard with their mothers and interact with the other children and inmates, but when four o'clock comes, they are locked into the cramped room with only their mother for company. Clearly, the facilities need to be updated and improved to provide a more baby-friendly environment. The social worker with DCC suggested bright paint on the walls, toys in the playroom, and special cooking facilities for baby food.

### *Issues*

Given the lack of enrichment equipment in the mother and child unit, deprivation is a large concern for both the mothers in the facility and the social workers who provide services.

You find that the children as they grow in prison are very much scared of men, the only people they know are this uniformed people, and when they see somebody from the outside they are scared and they scream. They don't know cars; they don't know grass because correctional centers are usually concrete. They aren't exposed and it is very bad for young children. (Social Worker Comm Corr)

On my first day in the prison, I interviewed an inmate while she held her daughter. Although the baby was generally happy and seemed comfortable with all the inmates and the guards, whenever she looked at me she would scream and cry. At first I was confused, until I looked

around and saw that virtually all the women in the facility, both guards and inmates, were black. Having grown up in seeing only black women, the sight of an unfamiliar white face probably scared her. The mother told me that when the prison finally installed a television in the mother and child unit, all the babies cried because they had never seen a television before and it frightened them.

As discussed in the literature review, spending the first two years of their life in such a restrictive environment can have a devastating impact on the cognitive development of these children. The mother I interviewed seemed to realize this, when she acknowledged the deprivation present within the prison environment. She spoke dreamily about leaving prison with her daughter, “I want to see her going out, seeing cars, taxis. I want to see her when she is free, when she is in fresh air. She will have happiness.”

As destructive as life in prison can be for young children, separation from their mother at the age of two is infinitely more painful for both mother and child. A social worker at Comm Corr described the situation as “very pathetic and very painful.” Usually the child is in the prison because the incarcerated mother cannot find someone else to care for the child, a situation that usually has not changed by the time the child turns two and legally has to leave the prison. Both social workers who participated in the study said they had personally dealt with situations where the DCS standard dictated the child should move to an external living situation. In one case, the incarcerated mother was able to find an aunt who was willing to take the child until the mother's release, but in the other case, the social workers found that “the environment was not going to serve because the grandmother of the child was abusing alcohol and she was living alone.” Because the mother did not want her child to live with strangers in a state-funded facility, the

social workers wrote an appeal to management to let the child remain in the prison longer than usually allowed.

I asked the mother in Eshowe Correctional Center where her daughter would live if she turns two before the mother receives parole. She said her daughter would have to go with a social worker into whatever environment they could find because she had no one else to care for her. I asked whether the baby's father would be able to take her in and the mother told me that he had not been to visit in months. "He hasn't seen her since she was ten months... He hasn't seen her walk." Due to the complete absence of any support structure outside the prison, this inmate's daughter might spend a large portion of her childhood inside prison walls.

The social worker at Comm Corr spoke of implementing Early Childhood Development Programs within the prison. She wanted the prison to establish a crèche where the babies could learn to interact with one another and experience positive stimuli. The social workers also mentioned the importance of bringing toys into the prison. "Children, they learn through playing most of the time. So when we are making these toys available to them they tend to learn in the process. It is very important, very important." (Social Worker DCS). Research has discovered that mother and child units only promote healthy mother-baby relationships if the children are able to grow as normally as possible. Additionally, the prison has no program for the mothers in the unit. These mothers need access to parenting classes so they can learn how to care properly for their child both inside the prison and when they are released. The social worker with Comm Corr spoke vaguely about a parenting program where the DCS would hire professional caretakers to teach women parenting essentials, but she indicated that the program did not continue. Clearly, the unit at Eshowe needs lots of attention if it is to provide any benefit for the

mothers and children.

### *Opinions of other Inmates*

“As much as a child needs a mother or a mother needs a child, but I always look at the environment in prison. It seems to me not good.... I just with sometimes if somebody has a baby the family can come and take the baby. But sometimes you find it is difficult to do that. When you have your little one you want always your child to be with you.” (former inmate).

The inmates of Eshowe Correctional Facility had strong opinions about the presence of babies within the prison. Within the “Starting with Us” group, none of the women thought it was positive to have babies in prison. They spoke about vulgar language and violent behavior as having a negative effect on the children who learn prison culture rather than childhood games. They also said that the babies see sexual acts. The only private area in the prison is the corner near the mother and child unit, therefore inmates involved in same-sex relationships venture to that corner when they want to engage in intimate acts. The mothers in “Starting with Us” worried that the babies would not understand what they saw and grow up with a warped understanding of sexual relations. They discussed the inadequate nutrition babies in prison receive, “too much starch,” and how the environment was emotionally destructive for the babies. They spoke of how the warders and other inmates always complain about the burden the babies place on the prison, in terms of special supplies and attention. The women worried that if the babies heard themselves described as a burden for so long, they would eventually begin to form a negative self-image that would haunt them the rest of their lives. As much as these women missed their children and frequently worried about their daily needs, they still would not have brought their children into the prison. They would rather worry about what is happening in their children's lives than know they are being exposed to the negative prison environment.

As discussed in the literature review, research suggests that mother and child units can

have enormous positive benefits for imprisoned mothers and their children. They can promote healthy bonds, teach parenting skills, and even lower recidivism rates. However, the opinions of the women from “Starting with Us” taken in conjunction with the inadequate physical environment of the mother and child unit at Eshowe Correctional Facility suggest that the unit does more harm than good.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout the two-week period in the prison, I noticed many inconsistencies between what the women said about motherhood and what they had experienced as mothers. One of the qualities they emphasized in a “good mother” was the ability to care for children, both financially and physically, however these women were in a position where they could not care for their children. They mentioned that bad mothers were women who abandoned their children, an issue about which each of the women felt personally guilty. They wanted more contact with their children, but did not want to tell them that they were in prison. Although the women said they never wanted to do something that would land them back in prison and away from their children again, many of them were repeat offenders serving their second or third sentence. All of these inconsistencies indicate that the mothers in “Starting with Us” had not developed a new understanding of motherhood to match their experiences in prison. They could not reconcile their separation from their children with their understanding of a “good mother.” Their own experiences clashed with their image of a good mother, leaving them with feelings of inadequacy and guilt. As Judith Clark discusses in her article, “The Impact of the Prison Environment on Mothers,” such feelings undermine positive mother-child relationships. I hypothesize they also lead to further issues regarding communication and honesty between mothers and children. If the

mother feels embarrassed and guilty about her incarceration, she might avoid meaningful contact with her children to elude confronting those issues within herself. The women in “Starting with Us” indicated that they were both “happy and afraid” of going home because they worried about what their children would ask them and the difficult conversations they would have.

Given the impact such feelings of inadequacy and guilt have on an imprisoned mother’s psyche, one would hope the DCS provides an outlet for women to address such issues. Alas, the women have nowhere to turn for help. Far from the supportive community I expected to find in an environment that contains so many mothers in the same situation, the inmates deal with their pain in isolation, meaning they do not develop positive coping methods. Similarly, the psychological and social services the prison provides fail to address adequately the difficulties of incarcerated mothers.

In terms of mother and child units, the evidence from this study indicates that the unit in Eshowe Correctional Facility needs major attention. One can hardly expect the mothers in the unit to parent effectively in such difficult conditions when they have no training and no tools with which to teach their children. The mothers in these units need training to learn how to raise a child in a harsh prison setting and they need support from a childhood development program within the prison that can address issues of environmental deprivation.

I suggest that in order to address the issues of maternal-child separation and mother and child units, the DCS and NGOs need to create programs that help incarcerated mothers deal with their own understanding of motherhood. These programs need to empower the women as mothers and show them ways they can succeed as parents even while incarcerated. The women need to establish a new understanding of motherhood that corresponds with their experiences;

one that tells them it is okay to stumble along the path of motherhood and teaches them ways to reclaim a parenting role while behind bars. This will require community support to help women maintain contact with their children in the form of regular phone calls, visits, and hopefully even excursions to promote healthy bonds. The evidence shows that when incarcerated women participate in such programs, their recidivism rate drastically decreases (Hoffman, Byrd, and Kightlinger 2009: 400).

External programs like Phoenix Zululand can aid this process by establishing programs that bring incarcerated mothers together to discuss their issues. My research found that women are very hesitant to share their feelings with others, even those involved in Phoenix programs, therefore such programs would need to be very intensive to bring the group together and create a sense of security. I would suggest more art projects and role-play situations to help break the tension and open the floor for sharing. I would also suggest utilizing guest facilitators who have experienced incarceration and separation from their children to help the women formulate a more positive self-image and provide insight to reconnect with their children.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

Given my complete lack of psychological training, I did not pursue certain topics with the women for fear of traveling into territory that could cause severe emotional distress. I also had only two weeks to conduct research, hardly enough time to gain complete confidence from the inmates. Therefore, this study merely skimmed the surface of a deep pool of information about incarcerated mothers. Future studies need to look further at how women in prison develop an understanding of motherhood, particularly with longer-term inmates. Another study could focus on former prisoners who have returned to their children. This study could analyze what methods

the women used to successfully reintegrate into their families and the community and potentially help create a program to teach incarcerated mothers those skills.

Research also needs to be done regarding mother and child units. I was only able to look at one unit and speak to one mother. A broader study could look measure the babies' emotional and intellectual development and ask the mothers about their needs in terms of parenting skills to develop a program for incarcerated mother and babies within these units. Another important study would look at children who spent the first years of their lives in prison to determine whether that experience had a lasting influence on their development.

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## Appendix I- General Outline for “Starting with Us” Sessions

### Session #1: Introduction to Phoenix Zululand and Starting with Us

- Welcome
- What is Phoenix Zululand?
  - Story of the Phoenix
- What is “Starting with Us” all about?
- Short introductions
  - name
  - how many children and who are they living with

### Session #2: Ourselves, our stories

- Sharing our stories
  - What is your name?
  - Where were you born?
  - Where did you grow up?
  - Talk about your family.
  - What were you doing and feeling on 27<sup>th</sup> April 1994?
  - What do you remember about apartheid?
- One-on-one interview with one participant

### Session #3: Life in Prison

- Meditation
- Discussion about prison life. What are your feelings/thoughts? Have they changed from when you first came to prison?

### Session #4: Motherhood part 1

- Recap what happened in last week's sessions.
- Movement exercise
- Discussion
  - In your culture, when is a woman ready to be a mother?
  - What makes a good mother?
  - When you were arrested, were your children present?
  - Do you think you should tell your children where you are?
  - How do you feel about being separated from your children?
  - Can you play a role as a parent while in prison?
  - How does it affect your child that you are away?
  - What do you think of the babies in prison?
- Homework: fold a large piece of paper in half. On one half draw your feelings about being separated from your children, on the other half draw your child's feelings about being separated from you.

#### Session #5: Motherhood part 2- Messages for Children

- Talk about homework
- What are the kind's of things children need to hear from their mothers?
- Read *Love You Forever* by Robert Munsch.
  - What do you think about the story?
- Take pictures to send to children.
- Homework: Write a message to send to you child.

#### Session #6: Motherhood part 3

- Talk about homework. How did you feel when writing the message to your child?
- Questions for group discussion:
  - What are your feelings about being a mother. What do you like? What do you dislike?
  - How important are your children to you?
  - Has prison changed the way you think about being a mother?
- Make cards for children

#### Session #7: Motherhood part 4

- Finish making the cards
- Discussion
  - What are your feelings about leaving prison and being with your children again?
  - Are you going to live with your children when you leave prison?
  - What are some things you can do if you feel sad while in prison?
  - What are some things you can do to help your relationship with your children? Both while you are inside prison and when you are released.
  - What are your hopes for your children?

## **Appendix II: Sample Interview Questions**

### **Interview with Woman in Mother and Child Unit:**

How old are you?

How long have you been in prison?

How old is your daughter?

Can you tell me about giving birth while in prison?

What is the best thing about having your baby here with you?

What is the worst thing about having your baby here with you?

Where do you get her clothes?

What do you do with her on a normal day?

Where would she go if she had to leave the prison?

What are your hopes for your daughter?

Is there anything that could be added to the prison that would help her?

What do you want to do when you leave the prison?

Do you want to have more children?

**Interview with Social Workers:**

How long have you worked for the DCS?

What is your specific job?

Where do the children of inmates usually live?

How do visits between an incarcerated mother and her children work?

Are there any programs that help with visitation between mothers and children?

What difficulties do incarcerated mothers face?

To the best of your knowledge, are they able to regain custody of their children when they leave prison?

What are your thoughts about Mother and Child Units?

Have you ever been involved in a situation where the child has to be removed from the prison? What happened?

What do you think would be most beneficial to be added to help incarcerated mothers and their children?

**Interview with former inmate/ Phoenix Facilitator:**

How did you get involved with Phoenix?

How long were you in prison?

How many children do you have?

Where did they live while you were in prison? Was that arrangement prearranged?

Where were your children when you were arrested?

Did you tell your children the truth about where you were?

How often did you see your children while you were in prison?

Were you able to maintain a mother role while you were in prison?

How did you deal with the separation from your children?

Was it difficult to reestablish a relationship with your children when you were released?

Do you like being a mother?

What are your thoughts about Mother and Child Units?

What do you think would be most beneficial to be added to help incarcerated mothers and their children?