

Decolonising incarcerated women's identities

Looking through the lens of prison abolitionism

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Criminological discourses among people of African descent globally continue to suffer from a crisis of application of Western explanatory frameworks with gross implications for the development of African-centred epistemologies and frameworks. One of the central arguments in this paper is that criminological discourses, specifically on class-specific, racialised-gendered identities of incarcerated women, are not free of the colonial matrices of power that underpin imperialism. What will emerge in this article is that incarcerated women's identities should be reconstructed as women's criminalisation continues to be framed and presented in monolithic law-and-order ways. A focus on reconstruction is important to decolonise women's imprisonment by imperialist, white supremacist patriarchy, particularly focusing on how their pluralistic identities, which often collude and collide, shape their trajectories in unpredictable and criss-crossing ways to subject them to criminalisation. An analysis of case studies presented in this article will reveal how Black women's experiences of womanhood in the criminal justice system are shaped by race, gender and class, which produce different forms of subjectivities and embodied selves. The underlying question therefore is: how can incarcerated women's identities be reconstructed to challenge the hegemony of the western canon in criminology?

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This article seeks to reconstruct the identities of incarcerated women as something other than the monolithic homogenous group that is depicted by dominant criminological discourses. We can then properly appreciate how their plural identities collude and collide to shape their trajectories to incarceration in unpredictable, intersectional or criss-crossing ways. This deconstruction is important as it makes women's identities visible and, most importantly, it is an attempt to answer the question: why do some women, faced with similar circumstances, avoid

incarceration? We argue that, while women may face similar circumstances, their experiences of womanhood remain profoundly shaped by race, gender and class and produce different forms of subjectivities and embodied selves. Trying to understand women's routes to incarceration without taking account of these factors is limiting, and produces criminological discourses that fail to capture the subtle micro-social and macro forms of oppression and resistance, deviance and social control. This article draws on qualitative interview data from a larger study on women's trajectories to incarceration and presents narratives through which women told their stories and pathways from childhood.

Reimagining incarcerated women's identities

When individual identities are masked, they conceal a person's understanding of their existence and the individual self is hidden. Identities 'are visibly marked on the body itself, guiding if not determining, the way we perceive and judge others and are perceived and judged by them'.¹ The importance of individual identities has been considered by Hall² and Lowe,³ who argue along similar lines. Lowe states that while people may be seen as a 'collective block, it is also important to introduce a critical vocabulary to explore how individuals are materially – socially, culturally and economically distinct'.⁴

In deconstructing incarcerated women's identities, we consider that, within a given sample of women in correctional centres, such as the one in this article, there are heterogeneous, hybrid and multiple identities that characterise these women. Contrary to the dominant approach of labelling them as female offenders,⁵ we suggest that women in prison should be identified as female prisoners given that wrongful convictions cannot ever be ruled out entirely. Heterogeneity denotes 'the existence of differences and differential categories within a bounded category'.⁶ As is shown in the

discussion below, generational, economic and citizenship issues affect women's identities, thus pointing to the plurality of identities, even among similar categories of women. Such heterogeneous identities are further 'produced by histories of uneven and unsympathetic power relations', namely hybridity.⁷ These include racial as well as linguistic factors that may be traced to a 'history of survival within relations of unequal power and domination' in societies.⁸

A combination of heterogeneity among similar groups of women with hybrid identities result in a multiplicity of participants/subjects and subjective experiences among women in the correctional centres. For instance, women as subjects are located within social realities that continue to be determined by different axes of power, such as capitalism, patriarchy and race relations. Lived realities within these conditions of power produce and shape women's identities in ways that may influence them to come into contact with the criminal justice system as offenders.

To uncover identities, it is important to unmask differences between one's existence and related realities. It is within these distinct individual differences that the body (self) resides. Linda Martin Alcoff suggests that to unmask social identities in conjunction with a person's lived experience, the aim is to demystify the taken-for-granted assumptions about a particular population.⁹ Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues that to understand one's identity in the South African context requires an understanding of one's 'belonging, citizenship' both in terms of their racial and ethnic layers.¹⁰ This is demonstrated by the ethnic orientations of the sample of women, which comprised women of Zulu, Tswana, Xhosa, Pedi, Shangaan, Swazi and Ndebele ethnicity.

In the East London female correctional centre, it was interesting that, while the Xhosa-speaking women spoke the same language, they came from different clans, which in itself presented diverse cultural backgrounds in terms of their

belief systems and cultural practices. The influence of belonging to a particular clan was an important consideration when addressing women by their names or clan names. For instance, at this correctional centre, three women expressed their desire to be called by their clan names rather than their first names. These women were all in the age category of 50 years and above. Referring to women by their clan names was a sign of respect for their dignity. As Manyathi (55) indicated, for some women, being invited to narrate their stories using their clan identities re-assured them that they would be understood. This enabled them to tell their stories in a way they felt comfortable with, and which validated their stories. For instance, in a conversation with Manyathi, she said:

Call me Mamu Manyathi. You know there are so many things that happen in our lives. You know what happens here, for instance there was this old man called Nomnqa and he used to understand me. I was very close to doing what I think I will do with you because he could listen. So now if I have to speak English, which I cannot, what can I say and how do I say it. Then I have to change everything and not say the things and out them the way I want to.

Acknowledging ethnic orientation is valuable to highlight differences among women and some ethnic groups, and also to validate the women's self-hood. It serves as a reminder that a person still belongs to a clan, even while incarcerated. When women presented themselves and voiced their preference for being called by their clan names, they engaged in a process of self-reclamation. In describing women's identities here, the aim is not to emphasise the features they share, nor to dehumanise these women, but rather to point out the significance of these different ethnic identities and belief systems, which may have formed a component of their trajectories to criminality. Ethnic identities further

impacted on how the women responded to each other and how they may be marginalised by other women within correctional centres.

The Shona inmates, for example, are mostly from Zimbabwe, and Naledi Mbotha (26) mentioned that they are always referred to as *makwerekwere*, a derogatory term used in Zimbabwe and in South Africa to describe Africans from neighbouring countries. Even though this is a non-South African marker that relates to citizenship, the term is used in this context as an ethnic reference when women speak about their ethnic orientations. For instance, South African Shona people have different belief systems from non-South African Shona people, and different ways of presenting themselves. All these differences and diversities have an impact on how women are accepted and treated by other women in correctional centres. Hence cultural sensitivity to the existence of culturally pluralistic identities is an important consideration.

These identities and the associated challenges are also inherent in society, where cultural and ethnic identities may create an impression that some ethnic groups are more prone to violence than others. Tonry argues that it is still important to examine 'distinctive patterns' among certain groups in order to move beyond single-focused analysis and to develop theories that are culturally relevant for intervention and rehabilitation in correctional facilities.¹¹ But most importantly, especially among Black women, ethnic orientations also underscore the significance of women's place of birth. Thirty-five of the 55 women (64%) in the sample were born in rural areas. With the exception of one Asian woman, who was also born in a rural area, all these women were Black. Of the sample, 11 women (20%) indicated that they were born in township areas. Five women (13%) indicated that they were born in urban or suburban areas. Two (Black) women indicated

that they were born in an informal settlement. Interestingly, when one examines the racial profiles of these women, all the women who indicated that they were born in rural and township areas were Black.

Eva de Leon Relucio argues that a woman's identity should reflect her peculiarities in order to 'give her the ability to construct her own theoretical space that challenges some appropriation and negation that assigns her as the other'.¹² As colonial discourse imposed an objectification of women on Sub-Saharan Africa as the 'underdeveloped, domestic and ignorant'¹³ the othering of women was entrenched. As this state of affairs continued, often women's interests and needs became marginalised.¹⁴ Henke argues that women cannot be 'reduced to threatening emblems of the flesh allied with the chaos of nature'.¹⁵ Any scholarship on African women in particular has to avoid categorising women in 'refrigerated worlds of aesthetic stasis and transforming her into a disembodied muse ... controlled by the male imagination'.¹⁶ Nowhere is this marginalisation more evident than among incarcerated women whose voices remain silenced, though a growing body of arts activists are increasingly working especially in women's prisons to help to provide agency for the voices of the incarcerated.

Similar to weaving a cloth of many colours, particularities and women's different biographies (such as their place of birth) are discussed in the next section in order to reflect on women's place of belonging and how it shapes their lives and lived realities. The aim is to produce theories and identities that do not hide histories of colonialism, racism and sexism as forms that have affected, influenced and indeed effected women's identities.

Methodological approach and sample

The sample comprised of 55 women whose age ranged between 18 and 75 years. Most of

the participants were Black women. The focus on Black African women was not deliberate. Instead, in the three correctional facilities, Black women formed a majority of sentenced offenders who volunteered to participate in the study. Permission to conduct the study as well as ethical clearance were obtained from the Department of Correctional Services and also from the institution where the researcher was registered for a Doctoral qualification.

The sample comprised of women from four indigenous groups: Xhosa, Zulu, Pedi and Venda. The dominant language of communication was Zulu and because one of the researchers is a Xhosa-speaking woman, this limited language barriers with the researchers. The implication of the varied ethnic representations presented an opportunity for the nuances related to traditional, ethnic and cultural practices to emerge. Due to this, it became clear that Black woman's standpoint, a Black feminist methodology which explains the specific experiences of Black women, would best fit the study.¹⁷ Feminist standpoint is not only a theory, but a methodological approach and an analytical tool to bring subjugated indigenous knowledges about certain groups into the forefront of knowledge.¹⁸ Thus, Black women's standpoint was necessary to contextualise the experiences of young women in order to 'disrupt the valorization of young girls incarcerated for offences as "nasty little madams"'.¹⁹ Hill-Collins further explains that the use of Black feminist standpoint methodological frameworks is predicated on the premise that the '... role for Black female intellectuals is to produce facts and theories about the Black female experience that will clarify a Black woman's standpoint for Black women'.²⁰

As narratives facilitated an illumination of both individual and collective life stories, a thematic narrative analysis was used as a data analysis tool. According to Bamberg and McCabe, narrators 'create themes, plots and drama. In

so doing narrators make sense of themselves, social situations and history'.²¹ Based on this, the themes from the narratives were categorised to demonstrate areas where there were shared experiences. Though the experiences remained complex and fluid there were intersecting and common themes that influenced the choice of a thematic narrative analytical tool. These shared experiences necessitate the reading of Black women's lives in ways that rupture the silences and misconceptions of who these women are. The emphasis on standpoint crystallises into a methodological tool that identifies 'connections between experiencing oppression, developing a self-defined standpoint on that experience, and resistance'.²² hooks describes this process as examining women's lives 'both from the outside and from the inside'.²³ This implies understanding both worlds in order to reveal aspects of women's lives that would otherwise be 'obscured from reality' and from existing knowledge.²⁴

Racialised, class-specific, gendered identities

Michel Foucault describes incarceration as an imprisonment of the mind and body.²⁵ This is particularly significant, because Black women, compared to white, Indian and coloured women, are more likely to be affected by high unemployment rates and underemployment,²⁶ which are leading trajectories to incarceration among Black women.²⁷ The racial profiles of women incarcerated in correctional centres in South Africa reveal a numerical overrepresentation of Black women. International trends regarding incarcerated women also reveal the overrepresentation of Black and African-American women in correctional centres.²⁸

It is imperative to locate an analysis of Black women's incarceration within the contextual realities of Black women's positions in South

Africa. A majority of black women's incarceration was due to having committed economic offences.²⁹ Trajectories to shoplifting reveals specific historical realities of limited economic opportunities, low levels of education and limited access to viable forms of income. One of the challenges of post-apartheid South Africa is chronic unemployment and underemployment, particularly among underprivileged groups. Several reasons for this have been cited, including the 'historic inequalities', which are a legacy of apartheid and related histories of colonialism. The symptoms of such inequalities in the criminal justice system are evident in 'the poor being underrepresented in privileged institutions yet overrepresented in prisons'.³⁰ These observations are evident in the correctional settings, and in the wider community, where higher unemployment rates, not only in South Africa but also in other settler-colonial locations like the United States, Australia, New Zealand and Canada are to be found among indigenous communities, as shown by West.³¹

In addition to historic inequalities, Black women, particularly young women, remain marginalised because of a complex range of interrelated factors, such as access to education, cultural constraints and early teenage pregnancies. Given this background, it is not surprising to note that in a sample of 55, the majority (34 women) reported that they had never been employed. The young women under the age of 25 cited reasons such as lack of funding or financial assistance to pursue university or college education (Lerato, 20), lack of interest in school (Thembakazi, 22), forced marriages at an early age, leading to homelessness with no emotional or financial support (Noluntu, 24). Teenage pregnancy, depression and anxiety over neglect by her mother, and not knowing who her own father is were cited by some of the younger women. Other reasons included loss of interest in pursuing college or university

education, despite the ability of parents to provide financial support (Naledi, 28).

A point of interest was how women survived in their communities. Several of them, because they had children, indicated that as a form of survival they depended on their live-in partners (Matlou, 25, Fumi, 30, Mudzhanani, 29), parents, mostly their mothers (Lerato, 20, Patience, 20, Noxolo, 19, Peace, 19, Eva, 18, Nancy, 22), extended family members (Naledi, 28), survival sex (Lebo, 26) and grandmothers and uncles (Noluntu, 24). All the reasons given are not explored in their entirety because they are so multifaceted, but it is important to note from this summary of reasons that there is not one single factor that can be isolated to explain women's unemployment status. Some of these examples resonate with the available literature, but in the African context there is a myriad of cultural factors in Black communities especially, which can impede the employability and the education of women, even among adult women.

The participants also included women who indicated that they had never been formally employed. Upon discussing the women's familial structures, it emerged that seven of these women were self-employed. They occupied entrepreneurial positions such as company director, owner and principal of a day-care centre, restaurateur, shebeen owner and taxi owner. Because of the varied positions that the women occupied, their formal educational qualifications varied. Largely, the women in directorship positions held the highest educational qualifications, while those who indicated that they were shebeen and taxi owners mostly had lower educational achievements. One of the interviewees was Ntombifikile (55):

Ntombifikile: I did all my businesses without any education. I did it all without education. My kids never went to bed

without food. Look even my son went as far as Standard 6 and the two passed their matric and I sent them to school even though I had only passed a Standard 4. I don't want the school anymore.

Researcher: What about something on business skills?

Ntombifikile: Even that I don't want because I did my business and excelled at it without any education.

These women are respected in both township and rural locations. Outside of their own communities, they are likely to be misrepresented as uneducated and uninformed, although their status within their communities does not tally with the urban conception of what employment and earning an income should be. Owning shebeens and taxis are indeed everyday forms of survival common in township and rural areas through which women earn an income and provide for their families.

Among the women who indicated that they were formally employed, ten women, of whom eight were Black and two were coloured, indicated that they held low-paying jobs (these women were employed as cashiers, cleaners, a shop assistant, a sex worker, a metal polisher in a scrapyard, and domestic helpers). The women's educational achievements were also relatively low. Matlou (25), who dropped out of school due to limited finances, indicated that her lack of skills impeded her ability to apply for most jobs, and so she worked as a hairdresser, earning R50 a day at a construction company. Fumi (30) worked in a scrapyard because she had run away from poverty and an abusive stepfather. Nomsa May (21) dropped out of school due to an undiagnosed illness, which resulted in her grandmother chasing her away from home, being neglected by her mother, abused by her stepfather, and finally moving to the city to be employed as a domestic worker. Yvonne (22) also dropped out of school due

to a teenage pregnancy, and was employed as a cleaner. Buhle (21), who left Zimbabwe when her parents could not afford to pay for her education, arrived in South Africa and worked on smallholdings as a farm labourer, and as a street vendor. The two coloured women in this age group were also lowly employed. Anna (25) described having left school early because of a lack of emotional support, and depression caused by neglect by her father and an absent mother due to work commitments. She sporadically got jobs, including ones as a cleaner and a waitress. Joyce (19) worked as a cashier in a local shop, and also dropped out of school due to a teenage pregnancy. Such blue-collar jobs pay low wages. Some women, for instance, indicated that they could barely afford their daily living expenses and that of their children (the women's position vis-à-vis their children is discussed in the next section). Some women earned as little as R50 a day, while some (Nomsa May, 21, and Grace, 18) indicated that they earned R700 per month as domestic helpers.

Coquery-Vidrovitch argues that among Black women, unemployment, underemployment and illiteracy levels point to a lack of emancipation and development.³² This situation is exacerbated by the fact that 'group rights are still favoured over individual rights'.³³ In the struggle for gender equality in employment and other sectors of the economy, calls for women's rights fail to account for the domestic and private spaces that thwart the development and emancipation of women. For women in urban areas, or *ekasi*, the practice of trading in front of one's home, at the taxi rank and in neighbourhood stalls still prevails. As husbands' income became reduced or where husbands failed to earn an income or send it home, women's work purpose changed. Therefore, city life and this informal trading is an impetus for providing 'daily bread'.³⁴ Tiny profit margins lead some women to engage in shoplifting.

Offence categories and incarceration

In the South African context, the official criminal classifications include economic, aggressive, sexual, narcotics and many other categories of crime. In the sample of 55 women, the offence categories ranged from women incarcerated for economic offences, aggressive, narcotic offences and other crimes (stock theft, perjury and defeating the ends of justice, parole violation, accessory to murder). The official classification provided by the Department of Correctional Services fails to include women who are incarcerated for dual or multiple offences, like Ivonne (45), who has been incarcerated for theft and assault, which falls under both economic and aggressive offending. Because of this, one can argue that this classification is too narrow, and that it is vital to classify inmates per criminal category or offence type to enable a more nuanced understanding of the women's criminal identities. The specific offence categories revealed that 14 women were incarcerated for shoplifting, 22 women were held for murder, six for theft, five for fraud, three for assault, three for drug trafficking and one for perjury and defeating the ends of justice.

In the murder cases, 19 of the women were incarcerated for killing people they knew – a husband (n=4), fiancé (n=1), boyfriend (n=1), girlfriend's lover (n=1), lover (n=1), own child (n=3), friend's husband as an accomplice (n=1), and brother (n=2). The analysis of murder categories is particularly significant, as it not only affects the security placement of women in correctional centres, but it may also assist in the formulation of correctional sentence plans.

Most of the women incarcerated for murder were first-time offenders with no prior convictions or arrests. In the current study, the exceptions were Manyathi (55) and Eveshnee (56). Both were incarcerated for murder-related incidents, and are repeat offenders. What is interesting in their narratives is how insignificant

they considered their first offending to be, compared to the seriousness of offences for which they were convicted. Manyathi, for instance, narrates the circumstances related to her first offence:

Manyathi: The one thing that made things worse for me is that in 2001 my car was stolen and instead of sentencing the person who stole the car, I was sentenced.

Researcher: What happened?

Manyathi: I shot a person who was stealing my car. I was trying to shoot at the wheels of the car and someone who was at the back of the bakkie came out as I was shooting the tyres and I accidentally shot him. My car had already been stripped of most of the parts and I had received a tip-off that on that day it was being driven in town, so then I followed the lead. The police also failed, I found all the missing parts of my car.

Researcher: When did this happen?

Manyathi: In 2004. So this is what made me to be sentenced heavily [now] because in this case I had received a suspended sentence. The person had died but I buried the person because I had no grudge against him. I don't even know how he died because he was injured in the arm when I visited him in hospital. But I think he might have died of a heart attack because of the shock. Nothing major happened. This was a woman who had apparently hired the bakkie to transport traditional beer. Even her family did not hold a grudge against me.

Eveshnee (56) recalls her previous offence:

I was a 'naughty girl' because of the shoplifting. I had been arrested seven times for shoplifting. I started shoplifting in

the 1980s. One day I stole a chocolate; I was sentenced for a few months in 1987 and was released on parole in 1988.

It is clear that these women did not regard their previous arrests and sentencing as a significant factor, because they did not consider their actions as 'serious'. Such attitudes may stem from the fact that the women received lenient sentences (a suspended sentence and a short time in prison respectively). This may point to a correlation between the length of time a person spends in a correctional centre, the rehabilitative intervention provided within this time frame and the propensity to re-offend.

To support this argument, 19 of the 55 women had histories of previous arrests. Of this number, ten were arrested and/or incarcerated for shoplifting. In this category, Naledi (28), in the narrative explanation below, had the highest number of arrests, detentions and suspended sentences, but only two convictions:

I was ... I was in and out of police stations ... But maybe in my life since I started in 2001 to 2007 maybe I have been arrested about 80 times which meant 80 cases ... No I shoplifted over many times I can't recall. But the 80 times are some of the arrests. I was arrested many times. In most cases I was released on bail after that I never went to court. That's why I accumulated cases. I could afford bail. Then I had all the records and cases.

Other women convicted of shoplifting also had significantly higher numbers of arrests. These numerous arrests demonstrate the relative leniency with which some cases of shoplifting are handled by the criminal justice system. While this is in line with legislation, given the fact that shoplifting is classified as a less serious offence, it would seem from these narratives that leniency and a lack of punitive treatment against shoplifters failed to deter these offenders from more serious offences. A false

sense of agency among shoplifters and would-be shoplifters is fostered. Common among this category of women with previous arrests is also that they were arrested for similar offences, which may point to the failure of intervention and offence-specific rehabilitative programming for this class of offender.

In addition to the high numbers of shoplifters who were repeat offenders, two women, Anna (25) and Jane (30), who both served previous sentences for assault, were incarcerated again for similar offences. Although this number is small compared to that of shoplifters, the ineffectiveness of rehabilitative and intervention programming caused in part by the short sentences and the limited intervention (because of the limited time these women spent in a correctional facility) still requires reconsideration. It is clear, from the histories of previous offending presented in this study that some of the short-term offenders with numerous criminal histories receive limited intervention strategies that may help them to desist from future offending. What might further impede restorative or rehabilitative efforts is the fact that some of the women return to similar environments because of a lack of post-incarceration intervention. Aside from the fact that some of these women re-offend, it is also important to examine whether they take responsibility for their actions, or apportion blame to another party. Acknowledgment of guilt determines individual behaviour and attitudes towards rehabilitative and intervention programming in a correctional centre.³⁵

Given the situation of Black women in Africa, Ogundipe-Leslie argues that, in discussing the circumstances that lead women to prison, an analysis of the marginalisation of particularly a Black woman should consider seven areas, namely, 'her body, her person, her immediate family, her society, her nation, her continent and her location'.³⁶ What she advocates is

an analysis of Black women's lived realities in relation to 'the oppression from outside in the form of colonialism and neo-colonialism, oppression from traditional structures, her own backwardness, her man, her colour or her race, and how the woman herself has internalised these oppressions'.³⁷ In relation to colonialism and neo-colonialism, Thiam observes that the positions of Black women in Africa require continuing struggles against racist-imperialist patriarchy while their European counterparts may be engaged only in identity politics.³⁸

Hence, it remains important that the existential realities of Black women in South Africa are analysed from Thiam's viewpoint in order to highlight the legacies of colonialism, neo-colonialism and apartheid struggles, and the indelible marks they have left on women's lives. The social location and positioning of Black women have a huge impact on women's access to basic resources, such as education, employment and better living conditions.³⁹ The majority of the Black women interviewed were unemployed or underemployed. They had to rely on child income grants for their own survival, particularly younger Black women. They had left school at an early age, which impacted negatively on their livelihoods. As Thiam argues, 'the Black African woman, be she town-dweller or villager, married, divorced or single, has a deplorable life',⁴⁰ though, today, the middle-class Black women may have access to better jobs and education due to class privileges.

Women's ethnic identities

Black women's identities cannot be subsumed under one category as they belong to different ethnic groups and even nationalities. One of the main flaws of criminal classifications is the absence of ethnic identifiers in classification schemes.⁴¹ The Department of Correctional Services does indicate nationality in the statistical

representation of inmates, but it fails to delineate ethnic identities among the incarcerated population. It is therefore impossible to make any comparisons on the basis of ethnic identities to determine the groups most likely to be incarcerated, especially politicised ethnicity that particularly expose women to sexual violence as a weapon of war. Ethnic representations are important as they 'enable one to theorize how different generations living in the diaspora can understand their ethnic and national backgrounds'.⁴²

An examination of ethnic identities among women may shed light on the customs and cultural practices that have an impact on women's lives. Describing her ethnic identity, Monica Mase (45) said:

Monica Mase: As VhaLemba, we are not pure Venda. Originally we come from Zimbabwe, right next to the border.

Researcher: Are you totally different from VhaVenda?

Monica Mase: Yes totally different. The language (if we are together as VhaLemba we don't speak the same language). Even when we are together we have different religions. She [pointing to one of the inmates seated outside] is also VhaLemba. There are only three of us in this prison. No, we are Venda but not the same things. We have our own beliefs.

Monica Mase points to the importance of stratifying women on the basis of ethnic orientations, as Blackness alone does not necessarily define a woman's identity. The effect of the failure to classify women rests on the insufficiency in handling cultural nuances of women during rehabilitation and intervention. The social recognition of the subjectivities, identities, beliefs and spiritualism in inmates such as Mase may be disregarded.

As mentioned previously, despite these ethnic strata, Black women's lived realities are inherent in histories of colonialisms and apartheid, which led to hierarchies of human superiority and inferiority. Grosfoguel, Oslo and Christou argue that those who live in places deemed inferior thus occupy zones of non-being where their skin colour intertwine with class, gender, ethnicity, culture or religion to further their oppressed conditions.⁴³ One might argue that being in prison itself also provides a qualitatively distinct experience than those who live lives outside the prison confines. Women's positionalities and inherent experiences of gendered oppression within the correctional system are further worsened by limited gender sensitive treatment.

A call for de-homogenising incarcerated women's identities

In problematising identities of women incarcerated in correctional centres, one therefore is able to argue that Black women's incarceration should be analysed in relation to histories of colonialisms and apartheid. Because identities are less over-riding theories than colonialism and apartheid in the Southern African context and therefore criminology should, as a start, rid itself of colonial criminological discourses. It is crucial for criminological discourses to demystify the myths of colonial criminology and delink itself from patriarchal discourses that lead to Black women's silences.⁴⁴ In this paper, we subvert the known profiles of women as majority Black and poor. Rather we argue that there is a fluid nature of incarcerated women's identities in ways that defy the patriarchal canon. Women's voices are therefore unmuted and are able to locate themselves within the discipline instead of being reduced to gibberish.⁴⁵ Once they speak, they break out of a prison of verbal constraint.⁴⁶

Conclusion

The discussion in this paper reveals that women do not have fixed identities, given race, ethnicity, class, religion, sexuality, nationality, disability differences. Incarcerated women shift positions, which has an impact on their modes of survival and indicates the extent to which histories of racialised-gendered-class inequalities severely affected their survival and that of their children. The location of their birthplaces cannot be the only precursor for involvement in incarceration. Numerous lived circumstances intersect, leading to trajectories to deviance and incarceration. It is therefore important to demystify and disrupt existing identity constructions about incarcerated women, in order to avoid viewing certain forms of behaviour as abnormal and in need of treatment and the inferiorisation of women in correctional centres. Acknowledging different identities within the community of incarcerated women may be a first step towards self-reclamation and may lead to positive responses towards rehabilitative and intervention programmes with emphasis on penal abolitionism. Angela Davis answered her rhetorical question, 'are prisons obsolete?' affirmatively.⁴⁷ We agree with her analysis that female prisons may pave the way for the abolition of prisons because most incarcerated women do not belong in barbaric institutions, which were absent in Africa until they were imposed by Europeans for the purpose of controlling others.

Further criminological discourses with a focus on correctional matters cannot continue to deny racism as a common feature that lead Black women to incarceration.⁴⁸ Criminology on the African continent, which continues to treat racism and colonialism as a thing of the past, produces cultural knowledge that claims to be non-racist. This despite the fact that colonial/racial subjects, in the zones of non-being, experience higher unemployment rates,

higher poverty rates, higher dropout rates, lower quality of education in public schools, lower salaries for the same jobs as white workers or are placed in the dirty jobs of the labour market, as evidenced above in the sample of Black incarcerated women. One therefore cannot produce knowledge that seems to support arguments that only refer to incarcerated women as merely the mostly unemployed and uneducated, without reference to the positionalities they occupy in post-apartheid South Africa. Meritocratic discourses in public spaces or culturalist social capital approaches in academia contribute to the invisibility and perpetuation of the problem.⁴⁹ Knowledge is not detached from racial/colonial domination and we conclude that a broad penal abolitionism approach should be the core of a decolonial strategy.⁵⁰ Precolonial Africa had no prisons for women and postcolonial Africa should strive for the abolition of prisons in Africa to be replaced with the Ubuntu praxis of forgiveness, truth, reconciliation and restorative justice, as has been suggested by Angela Davis who found prisons to be obsolete, and by Tutu and Tutu who offered forgiveness as a better response to wrong-doing.⁵¹ Arlene Africa also concluded that the monolithic identity of 'violent women' does not exist because women involved in violence (though she still referred to them as violent women) construct different identities, as we argued above.⁵²



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Notes

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