

Self-Harm and Women in Conflict with the Law

By Cathy Fillmore and Colleen Anne Dell, Elizabeth Fry Society of Manitoba

The study on which this article is based, "Prairie Women, Violence and Self-Harm," examined the connection between the critical events in childhood and adult life of women who inflict harm on themselves (self-harm) and their social position.¹

The increase in the number of women in conflict with the law who harm themselves is alarming. A 1995 study found that 59 percent of women in Canada sentenced for federal offences have committed self-injury.² Although the link between childhood experience of abuse and violence and self-harm is widely acknowledged, the intersection of self-harm with adult experiences of violence and abuse, and one's social position is frequently overlooked.³

For the study, 44 women with a history of being in conflict with the law were interviewed. Some of them live in the community, others, in correctional institutions. Aboriginal women comprised 64 percent of the sample, Caucasians, 32 percent, and others, 3 percent. Nine staff members in the community and correctional agencies were also interviewed. A focus group discussion was also held with six incarcerated women. In addition to a survey of correctional staff, several community service and correctional institution policies and practices on self-harm were reviewed.

The study found that adult experiences of violence and abuse—particularly partner abuse—were common among the women. An important finding is that some women linked abuse by their partners to self-harming behaviours and identified this abuse as a risk factor. Most of the women have a common experience of poverty—both material and social, and growing up in highly unstable and unsupportive families. Another important finding is that both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women said they benefited from, and highly value, traditions from Aboriginal culture, and believe these traditions should be incorporated into programmes designed to address self-harm.

The women mirror the profile of a woman in conflict with the law in the Prairie region of Canada.⁴ The average age is 31 years, with grade 10 being the common educational level reached. Many of the women had been placed in various group and foster homes as youths. The majority revealed highly unstable and transient relationship pat-

terns. The women had an average of two children, with most of the children living in foster care, group homes, or adopted out.

The likelihood of self-harm was strongest when the women were in highly unstable and unsupportive families and adult partnerships. Such families were characterised by: frequent moving and intermittent or permanent placements in foster and group homes; absent, weak, or traumatic bonds with primary caregivers (especially the mother); unmet emotional and social needs; and childhood abuse and violence (sexual, emotional, physical, and neglect). In the women's adult relationships, abuse and violence, primarily by a partner, were common.

Functions of Self-Harm

Both the women integrated into the community and those in detention identified partner abuse, loss of and separation from their children, isolation and loneliness as the leading risk factors for self-harm. However, for the women in detention, traumatic recollections of past child abuse were the critical risk factor that precipitated their conflict with the law.

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Except for one, the women had experienced violence and abuse as an adult, primarily by a partner. "With your spouse, you're too scared [to fight back] sometimes," one woman said. "You've been hurt so many times, why not hurt yourself? 'There, I did it, you happy?'" The relationship between women's self-harm and partner violence is an important area obviously requiring further investigation.

The women mentioned several functions of self-harm that enabled them to survive and cope with the unbearable emotional pain and distress:

- To cope with an abusive partner
- To fill the need for attention and nurturing
- Self-punishment and self-blame
- To deal with isolation and loneliness
- To distract and deflect pain
- To release and cleanse oneself of pain
- To feel or bring oneself back to reality
- To express painful life experiences
- To control oneself

Although most of the functions of self-harm identified by the service providers corresponded to those identified by the women themselves, the former minimised the importance of some of the functions identified by the women, such as to meet the need for attention and nurturing and as a response to isolation and loneliness. From the service provider's perspective, moreover, the women's self-harm was a form of manipulation and a way to make the staff take control over them.

Effective Response

The women expressed a need for more opportunities to express and discuss their emotional pain and distress. In particular, they wanted recognition of their experience of abuse and violence, both in staff interaction and in the form of specific programmes. The women also cited a need for a deeper understanding and insight into their self-harming behaviours and to learn healthier, empowering coping mechanisms.

Both the women and the staff found Aboriginal approaches to healing helpful, and believed these would be an effective component of any programme to address self-harm. These traditional Aboriginal teachings, they said, offer a balanced and meaningful approach to self-recovery.

A common perception was that many of the current practices to prevent self-harm are inappropriate. Indeed, previous research indicates that the tendency toward self-harm increases with segregation and similar "punitive" measures, such as restraints, could re-traumatise women who have experienced childhood or adult violence.⁵

The women interviewed also demonstrated personal agency and a creative capacity for identifying alternatives to self-harming behaviour. The women wrote in journals and

engaged in vigorous physical activity. Daily smudging (burning sage as a cleansing ritual) was used to attend to spiritual needs. The women also turned to friends and partners, and sought individual counselling, peer support programming, group therapy and community agency support. Volunteer work, babysitting and other activities that allowed the women to feel they were making a contribution were also identified as helpful responses.

Clearly, a holistic, woman-centred approach to eliminate self-harm is necessary. This requires, however, not only the recognition of women's unique personal histories and biographies, but also an understanding of the social antecedents of self-harm that are rooted in child and adult experiences of violence and abuse. Women's self-harm cannot be separated from their social contexts and structures.

Following this study, the Elizabeth Fry Society of Manitoba developed a brochure that suggests coping behaviours for women prone to harming themselves. Contact information: Elizabeth Fry Society of Manitoba, 773 Selkirk Avenue, Winnipeg, MB, Canada R2W 2N5; Tel: (1-204) 589 7335; Fax: (1-204) 589 7338; E-mail: <c.fillmore@uwinnipeg.ca> or <cadell@ccs.carleton.ca>.

A copy of the full report "Prairie Women, Violence and Self-Harm" may be downloaded from <<http://www.pwhce.ca/pdf/self-harm.pdf>>. Or, to order a copy, contact: Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence, 56 The Promenade, Winnipeg, MB, Canada R3B 3H9; website: <<http://www.pwhce.ca>>; Tel: (1-204) 982 6630; Fax: (1-204) 982 6637; E-mail: <pwhce@uwinnipeg.ca>.

Source: Canadian Women's Health Network and the Centres of Excellence in Women's Health, *Research Bulletin: Voices from the Community*, Summer 2003, Vol. 4, No. 1, <<http://www.cewh-cesf.ca/en/publications/RB/v4n1/page4.shtml>>

Footnotes

¹ Self-harm is defined as any behaviour, physical, emotional, social, or spiritual, that a woman commits with the intention to cause herself harm. It is a means of coping with the emotional pain and distress rooted in traumatic childhood and adult experiences of abuse and violence.

² Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies, "Fact Sheet: Alternatives to Incarceration," Ottawa, 1995.

³ An important exception is Babiker G and Arnold L., *The Language of Injury: Comprehending Self-Mutilation* (Leicester: British Psychological Society), 1997.

⁴ Adelburg E. and Currie C., eds., *In Conflict with the Law. Women and the Canadian Justice System* (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers), 1993, pp. 50-75; Elizabeth Fry Society of Manitoba, "Attending to the Needs of Manitoba Women in Conflict with the Law" (position paper), Winnipeg, 2000.

⁵ Dobash R.E., Dobash R. and Gutteridge S., *The Imprisonment of Women*, (New York: Blackwell), 1986. Cited in Joanne Martel, *Solitude and Cold Storage*, (Edmonton: Elizabeth Fry Society), 1999; Kershaw A. and Masovich M., *Rock-A-Bye-Baby: A Death Behind Bars* (Toronto: Oxford Press), 1996.