

Women's Pathways to Prison in Thailand

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Abstract : Thailand incarcerates the largest number of women and has the highest female incarceration rate in South East Asia. Since the 1990s, there has been a substantial increase in the number, rate and proportion of women imprisoned. Thailand places a high priority on the gender specific contexts out of which offending arises and the different needs of women in the criminal justice system. This is manifested in work undertaken to guide the development of the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules); adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2010. The Bangkok Rules make a strong statement about Thailand's recognition of and commitment to the fair and equitable treatment of women throughout their contact with the criminal justice system including at sentencing and in prison. This makes the comparatively high use of imprisonment for women in Thailand particularly concerning and raises questions about the relationship between gender, crime and criminal justice. While there is an extensive body of research in Western jurisdictions exploring women's pathways to prison, there is a relative dearth of methodologically robust research examining the possible gendered circumstances leading to imprisonment in Thailand. In this presentation, we will report preliminary findings from a qualitative study of women's pathways to prison in Thailand. Our research aims were to ascertain: 1) the type, frequency, and context of criminal behavior that led to women's incarceration, 2) women's experiences of the criminal justice system, 3) the broader life experiences and circumstances that led women to prison in Thailand. In-depth life history interviews (n=77) were utilized to gain a comprehensive understanding of women's journeys into prison. The interview schedule was open-ended consisting of prisoner responses to broad discussion topics. This approach provided women with the opportunity to describe significant experiences in their lives, to bring together distinct chronologies of events, and to analyze links between their varied life experiences, offending, and incarceration. Analyses showed that women's journey's to prison take one of eight pathways which tentatively labelled as follows, the: 1) harmed and harming pathway, 2) domestic/family violence victimization pathway, 3) drug connected pathway, 4) street woman pathway, 5) economically motivated pathway, 6) jealousy anger and/or revenge pathway, 7) naivety pathway, 8) unjust and/or corrupted criminal justice pathway. Each will be fully discussed during the presentation. This research is significant because it is the first in-depth methodologically robust exploration of women's journeys to prison in Thailand and one of a few studies to explore gendered pathways outside of western contexts. Understanding women's pathways into Thailand's prisons is crucial to the development of effective planning, policy and program responses not only while women are in prison but also post-release. To best meet women's needs in prison and effectively support their reintegration, we must have a comprehensive understanding of who these women are, what offenses they commit, the reasons that trigger their confrontations with the criminal justice system and the impact of the criminal justice system on them.

Keywords : pathways, prison, women, Thailand

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