This paper examines some results of a research on female offenders’ life histories and pathways to prison in Belgium. Women’s pathways into crime will be presented and the connection of these pathways to their life histories will be explored. The study reveals that the greater part of the research population are adult-onset offenders. The authors argue that the importance of adult-onset pathways for female offenders might be explained by the emergence of (gendered) vulnerabilities within the women’s lives, often accumulated not before adulthood.

**Key words:** women in prison, life histories, criminal careers, adult-onset offenders.

**Introduction**

For the past decade, women represent approximately 4% of the Belgian prison population. However, just as in other western countries (see e.g. McIvor, Burman, 2011; Morgan, Liebling, 2007), a rise of absolute numbers of imprisoned women is observed (Nuytiens, 2012).1 The massive growth of the body of research on women in prison is probably one of the side effects of the rise of female imprisonment. In the USA research on women in prison has a longstanding tradition. Several studies have gained important insights on female pathways to prison (see e.g. Girshick, 1999; Maeve, 2000; McClellan et

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1 We will not elaborate on possible explanations for this increase. We refer to other publications, such as Bloom et al. (2004) and McIvor and Burman (2011).
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al., 1997; Sommers, 1996; Owen, Bloom, 1995). An important share of this work has focused on specific subgroups of female prisoners, such as Black women (see e.g. Richie, 1996) and native Hawaiian women (see e.g. Brown, 2006; Chesney-Lind, Rodriguez, 1983). Publications on female prisoners in Australia are numerous as well. Some leading scholars who have paid particular attention to women in Australian prisons are for example Rosemary Sheehan (see e.g. Sheehan, Flynn, 2007; Sheehan et al., 2007) and Patricia Easteal (see e.g. Easteal, 2001; 2010). The Department of Corrective Services of Western Australia regularly conducts research on the profile of women in prison. The most recent report within this area was published in 2009 (Government of Western Australia, 2009). Within the UK research on women in prison has been particularly emergent since the 1990’s, with Pat Carlen (see e.g. Carlen, 1990; 1994; 1998; Carlen, Worrall, 2004) as one of the leading authors. More recently, several researchers within the UK such as Susan Batchelor (see e.g. Batchelor, 2005), Gill McIvor (see e.g. McIvor, 2004; McIvor, Burman, 2011) and Loraine Gelsthorpe (see e.g. Gelsthorpe, Morris, 2002) have paid specific attention to female offenders and prisoners. It is remarkable that quite a lot of these studies have been conducted in Scotland (see e.g. the Scottish Centre for Crime & Justice Research). In other European countries we observe a growing interest in the topic as well. For example, in the Netherlands, Anne-Marie Slotboom and colleagues published several articles on women in prison (see e.g. Slotboom, Bijleveld, 2007; Slotboom et al., 2008; 2011).

Despite this international tendency, Belgian research on female prisoners remains scant. In the media, in policy documents and in scholarly literature female prisoners are largely ignored. This might be explained by the fact that – in spite of the recent increase – the female prison population in Belgium remains relatively small (approx. 400-500). As a result, the stories behind the numbers remain unknown. In this contribution the qualitative profile of female prisoners in Belgium is explored. We will heavily draw on a recent PhD study on female prisoners’ life histories and criminal careers (Nuytiens, 2011). Before we explore some results, we will elaborate on the methodology.
Methodology

The main aim of the PhD study was to gain insight in the life histories and the criminal pathways of women in prison, and in the way these two aspects are connected. In the first research phase we conducted autobiographical interviews with female prisoners in Flanders (the Dutch speaking part of Belgium). The main reasons to select this method are strongly related to two aspects of the study. First, the study was conducted from an inductive perspective. For this purpose, autobiographical interviews are suitable because they lack structure and leave respondents more freedom to narrate. Second, the study aimed at exploring how the women experience and interpret their life histories, rather than at charting ‘the’ life history. In other words, we were not seeking for ‘reality’ or ‘the truth’ but rather for the construction of reality by the women themselves (Burr, 2007; Flick, 2004). A subjective perspective is crucial in order to understand the choices people make and the subjective factors that shape these choices. As Becker (2002: 80) stresses: “To understand why someone behaves as he does you must understand how it looked to him, what he thought he had to contend with, what alternatives he saw open to him; you can understand the effects of opportunity structures, delinquent subcultures, social norms, and other commonly invoked explanations of behavior only by seeing them from the actor's point of view.” In order to gain insight in subjective experiences, autobiographical interviewing is an appropriate method.

We interviewed female offenders in prison because the initial focus of the study was on ‘persistent female offenders’. We expected to find quite a lot of female childhood-onset offenders who continued offending through adulthood within prison. We interviewed 41 women in the Flemish adult prisons that are accommodated with a women section (Antwerp, Bruges, Ghent and Hasselt). This means that we reached about 20% of the female prison population in Flanders. Within the female prison population in Flanders we maintained only two selection criteria: the women had to be

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2 Because of the inductive and constructivist perspective, our data analysis was primarily centred around the women’s narratives (the lives as told and interpreted by the women), and the criminal pathways are interpreted against the backdrop of the interviews.

3 In Belgium the amount of women in prison fluctuates between 400 and 500, of which approximately 200 are detained in Flanders (Nuytiens, 2011: 21). Through the course of our fieldwork in the 4 prisons we found 90 women who fitted our selection criteria. Of these 90 women we had to refuse 10 women because of security reasons, emotional instability or communication skills. It mostly concerned women who were interned as mentally ill. The other
Dutch speaking and convicted (we excluded prisoners held in preventive custody). As a result, respondents have very heterogeneous backgrounds for what concerns offences, criminal career and age. Respondents were aged between 20 and 69. The mean age was 39.8 years, which is slightly older than the mean age of the female prison population in Belgium (Nuytiens, 2008). Five women were interned as mentally ill, the others were convicted to a prison sentence ranging from 5 months to life.

In the second research phase, the criminal pathways throughout childhood and adulthood of all interviewed women were reconstructed. For this purpose we made use of several data: Youth Court case files, criminal records, and detention records of the prison administration. We also included ‘self-reported’ delinquency within these pathways. Occasionally, during the autobiographical interviews women revealed some (minor) offences that were not recorded by the police (‘dark number’). In the discussion of our findings dark number is always included.

**Adult-onset offenders**

As opposed to our hypothesis, official pathway data show that most of the women are adult-onset offenders. This finding is confirmed by the interview data, where dark number is included. Only 7 of the 41 interviewed women committed at least one offence throughout childhood (childhood-onset offenders). In general it concerned shoplifting, often just once. Because we included self-reported offences as well, we can consider 34 women as ‘true adult-onset offenders’. When we look at the age of first conviction of this group, it appears that quite often they are convicted for the first time not before they reach the age of 30. According to McGee and Farrington (2010) the population of adult-onset offenders consists of ‘early adult-onset offenders’ (first criminal conviction before 30th birthday) and ‘late adult-onset offenders’ (first criminal conviction after 30th birthday). Within our population of 34 adult-onset offenders we identified 18 early adult-onset offenders and 15 late adult-onset offenders (1 missing value).

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80 women were contacted individually in prison. Of these 80 women, 43 agreed to participate. However, 2 interviews had to be ended because of emotional instability of the respondent.

4 McGee and Farrington (2010) argue that due to the problem of dark number, a third of the (male) adult-onset offenders would be false adult-onset offenders.
Within this qualitative study we did not aim at being representative. Yet we wondered why we found so little women with a youth offending history, and so many adult-onset offenders. First, women with a youth offending history might have learned to avoid police contacts and hence less frequently end up in prison. Second, selection effects within the prison population might have influenced our results. Women with a youth justice and / or youth offending history might be more reluctant to cooperate in our study. Third, the selection criteria might have distorted our results as well. For example, if we included women in preventive custody, or foreign women, our results maybe would be different. But finally, our results might as well be an accurate reflection of the female prison population (and maybe even the female offender population). The assumption that females start offending later in life than men, and that an adult-onset pathway is more common for female offenders than it is for males is increasingly put forward (see e.g. Block et al., 2010; Simpson et al., 2008). The large amount of adult-onset offenders in our population is in line with this literature. We believe that the importance of adult-onset pathways for female offenders might be explained by the emergence of (gendered) vulnerabilities within the women’s lives, often accumulated not before adulthood.

Vulnerabilities and gendered life contexts

Individual, societal and relational vulnerability

The life history of every interviewed woman is unique. However, the inductive analysis of the interviews revealed several recurring themes within their lives. The lives of the women are characterised by vulnerabilities in one or more life domains. These vulnerabilities are situated on three levels: the individual level (‘individual vulnerability’), the societal level (‘societal vulnerability’) and the relational level (‘relational vulnerability’). Individual vulnerability is mainly reflected in three key topics: (1) low self-esteem and low sense of worth, (2) psychological problems and (3) addictions (alcohol, medication, illicit drugs). Societal vulnerability is in general reflected in the

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5 Due to the abominable condition of databases and statistics of the Belgian administration, we could not fully exclude some kind of distortion in that sense.

6 Again, it is not possible to fully exclude this kind of distortion due to the state of Belgian statistics.
women’s fragile position in society. The most important societal vulnerabilities are related to (1) education, (2) work and (3) finances, with an obvious strong link between these three domains.7

‘Relational vulnerability’ appears to be the central item within the majority of life histories. It is the most recurring topic, and it plays the most important role within the life history. Vulnerabilities situated at the same level, as well as vulnerabilities situated at different levels can mutually influence and reinforce each other (Nuytiens, 2012). Within this interactive process, relational vulnerability is the most important one as it often acts as a catalyst in a chain of negative life events. The interviews show that relational vulnerability is a two-sided concept. On the one hand the women are literally vulnerable within (caring and romantic) relationships because they are victimised (physically, emotionally and / or sexually) often repeatedly by caregivers and / or romantic partners. On the other hand the women are figuratively vulnerable as they are deprived from ‘mutual empathic relationships’ (Miller, 1976) with significant others, sometimes as a result of victimisation within these relationships.

Relational vulnerability as reflected in the narratives

Most women mention problematical relationships with several significant others in their lives: parents, lovers, friends and children. The difficult relationship with the parent(s) is reflected in the fact that women often consider themselves as an unwanted child (mostly by the mother). One of the respondents puts it like this: “Throughout my childhood I struggled from one misery to the next misery. I was unwanted by mother. (…) She always gave me that message. Until today.” Moreover, building a mutual empathic relationship with parents in many cases is hampered by the physical absence (e.g. death) or emotional absence (unavailability) of parents. Sometimes this is the result of the mother being overburdened by her own (marriage) problems. One woman says: “I always had a quite good relationship with my mother, but I never went like: mum, I have this problem, and I don’t know what to do. For us (me and my sisters) it was like: leave that woman alone. She has enough worries already. And that is why we never shared our worries or problems with her.” Almost half

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7 Due to limited space we will not elaborate on individual and societal vulnerability in this contribution.
of the interviewed women mention physical and/or sexual abuse during childhood. In most cases the perpetrators are parents or stepparents.

Negative experiences within romantic relationships is the most common aspect within the life histories. Despite the heterogeneity amongst respondents in individual characteristics, social background and criminal career, there appears to be one shared life experience: abusive romantic relationships. All but one experienced at least one such relationship in adulthood. The most mentioned problem is physical abuse, but quite a lot of women were mentally and/or sexually abused as well by their partner(s). Others experienced financial abuse. For example, some women were exploited by their partner (e.g. prostitution). The abusive partners as a rule are described as very dominant, jealous and restricting the woman’s financial and physical freedom of movement. Some women never were allowed to go shopping alone or to have money: “When I went to the supermarket, I had to send him a text message when I was ready. Then he came in and paid.”

A typical aspect of domestic violence in its various forms is the controlling attitude of the abuser as a strategy (see e.g. Dobash, R.E., Dobash, R.P., 1998). Isolating the woman seems to be a purposive strategy in order to hide the scars of maltreatment, but also to prevent her from leaving (Coohey, 2007). Social contacts provide social control, and a shelter in case the woman wants to end the relationship. Hence, women who lack a solid social network are most vulnerable to domestic violence (Johnson, 1998, 42-43). The women in our research often lack a solid social network. One woman said: “I don’t have friends. This is why I depended so strongly on my boyfriend. When he left, there was nobody to go to.” Several women explicitly indicate that they lived an isolated life before their detention. This is often a consequence of the controlling attitude of their partner, as one of them noticed: “(When I was married) I never had friends. No. Never. And when I talked to someone, he (my husband) assumed that I told them that he molested me. And than I was in big trouble. As a result, I never talked to anyone.” Sometimes the woman lost touch with her family as well. This disconnection often results from a problematical relationship during childhood. For many women, the relationship with their own children is also disturbed. Although 28 women had one or more living children, 11 of them already lived apart before their (current) detention.

8 33 of the 41 women gave birth to at least one child. These 33 women together gave birth to 84 children. Six children died early (due to health problems, or due to child murder).
Several children were placed in foster care, due to e.g. addiction of the mother or conduct problems of the child.

**Patterns of victimisation**

Some women described a pattern of cumulative victimisation throughout the life course. The importance of early victimisation within these cumulative patterns are discussed in other works (see e.g. Giordano et al., 2006; Kruttschnitt, Macmillan, 2006). It is however not clear how these early experiences produce this specific pattern. Several hypotheses and explanations are put forward in the literature.

Based on the life histories of our population we believe that the deprivation of ‘mutually empathic relationships’ might be an important key to understand the continuity of relational vulnerability in general and victimisation in particular (Nuytiens, 2011). Being deprived from mutual empathic relationships in childhood makes women more vulnerable to abusive relationships later in life because (…) “Lacking the experience of empathic connection, their search led them to the spurious safety of the familiar – that is, relationships in which the other person was unresponsive” (…) (Sommers, 1996). In other words, negative relational experiences in childhood might affect choices for what concerns romantic relationships. For example, negative relationships in childhood can affect the tolerance of victimisation of abuse in adulthood. One women says about her abusive lovers: “I think I tolerate them doing this to me because me mother did it to me as well, I don’t know in fact.” In this sense, a cycle of abusive relationships can be produced (Wesely, 2006). Sommers (1996) argues that mutually empathic relationships are one of the essential conditions to reach empowerment. Hence, lacking such relationships prevents women to become empowered. This is why it is not easy to break this cycle.

‘Atypical’ life histories

The disadvantageous profile of female prisoners is not surprising as it confirms numerous studies in other western societies (see e.g. Batchelor, 2005; Cardi, 2007; Easteal, 2001; Girshick, 1999; McIvor, 2004; Slotboom et al., 2008). Based on the results of these studies, we expected to hardly come across women who do not fit this ‘negative’ picture of women with multi-
problematic backgrounds. Some studies on female prisoners do mention that a very limited part of these women have unproblematic backgrounds. We however found quite a lot of these women. We identified more women than we expected who painted a positive picture of their childhood and did not mention childhood abuse or maltreatment. Above this, we identified several women who lived a rather ‘normal’ or ‘average’ life before their detention. Their lives were characterised by a stable work situation, a solid social network and the absence of addictions. It is remarkable that these ‘atypical’ or ‘unexpected’ life histories as a rule reflected only one vulnerability: abusive romantic relationships.

**Female offending within the life context**

By confronting the life history and criminal pathway for each woman, we explored how crime emerges within the life history. Because of the importance of adult-onset pathways, we will focus on adulthood.

*The importance of abusive romantic relationships*

The results show that the emergence of crime is strongly related to the vulnerabilities on several life domains. More specifically, three salient factors were revealed: (1) financial need, (2) addictions and (3) abusive romantic relationships. While the first two are not surprising because they reflect some well-known ideas of classical criminological theories, the third factor seems to be more gender specific. For the majority of women, abusive romantic relationships are crucial in the emergence of crime in adulthood. Quite a lot of women got involved in criminal activities because of their life partners. The life histories show that several women were manipulated or intentionally (ab)used to commit crime (together). The women usually were isolated, found themselves in unequal power situations and feared their partner. The women who live in such gendered life contexts strongly depend upon their partner.

The stories reveal a wide range of possible ‘degrees of involvement’, strongly linked with the abusive nature of the relationship. We will illustrate this with some examples. Several women committed offences with their partner, which were planned or initiated by their partner. One woman got involved in a murder case because her boyfriend was a hit man: “My boyfriend
appeared to be a hit man. He put together the whole conspiracy (...). And in the end I participated as well. I went ringing at the (victim’s) door.” A number of women wrongfully confessed offences committed by their partner in order to safeguard him: “I knew what he had done. And I said (to the police) that I did it. (...) I just said I did it so he could leave prison.” (...) Another woman said: “My boyfriend was a drug dealer, he had this conditional prison sentence. When we got caught with drugs in our house, I said the drugs were mine because he had this conditional conviction.” Others kept silent their partners’ crimes, which led to a conviction for complicity: “My boyfriend and the other guy committed some armed robberies. (...) My boyfriend told me afterwards. So I knew, and I did not call the police. (...) I loved him so much that I was blind.” Finally, some women were convicted because their abusive ex-partner tricked them. According to them, their ex-partner wants to intimidate the woman or aims at getting child custody. One woman said that her ex-husband started to torment her after their divorce: “I committed most of my offences because of him. And I was… stupid and naïve. Like: can you go to the pharmacy for me? I’d left him already, but yes… I went to pick up the prescription, went to the pharmacy, and by the time I got back the police was there already. (...) I didn’t have a driver’s licence, so… (...) Then, one time, shortly after I left him, he called me to cash his holiday allowance into my account. I did it, and six months later he reported to the police that I stole his money.”

For some women the offences are directly connected to drug abuse and / or financial problems. However, even in these cases abusive relationships often play an intermediary of secondary role. Women who mention financial motives and / or drugs as essential in their pathway to offending, quite often refer to the importance of abusive romantic relationships in their pathway. For example: some women got involved in drug use and / or drug trafficking via their abusive partner. Others committed offences because their (violent and unemployed) partner spends the household money and there is no money left to feed the children. One of the respondents told us: “I had a very bad life with my husband. I stood by him for 24 years. (...) We had seven children, and I still had to go out working. My husband was unemployed, he was too lazy to work. (...) My income was not sufficient. (...) And like that it started… I started to take things without paying. For my children” (…). It is within these gendered life contexts that the role of romantic relationships in the emergence of female offending can be understood.
Women as active agents

Several researchers in other western societies agree that abusive romantic relationships are important in the understanding of female pathways to crime (see e.g. Cobbina et al., 2010; Gilfus, 1992; Haynie et al., 2005; Pollack, 2007; Richie, 1996; Sommers, 1996). Some of these (often feminist) scholars however don’t consider women as active agents. We do not agree with authors who reduce women to passive victims of their life circumstances who are ‘forced’ into crime (see e.g. Richie, 1996), who refers to this as being ‘compelled to crime’. Recognising the fact that relational vulnerability plays an essential role in the emergence of female offending, does not stand in the way of accepting that women are active participants in their life and make their own choices (see e.g. Ajzenstadt, 2009; Batchelor, 2005; Heidensohn, 1994). Most women in our research perceive themselves as active agents. They recognise their (sometimes maybe minimalised) share in their criminal activities, despite perceived manipulation or threats. Yet the life histories reveal that their ‘freedom of choice’ might be affected by the gendered life context. The accumulation of vulnerabilities throughout adulthood – often catalysed by relational vulnerability – results in the limitation of (real and perceived) options. This is what Anne Worrall (1999: 46) refers to as ‘the path of narrowing options’.

For our respondents, choosing the ‘criminal path’ indeed appears to be mainly shaped by these limited options of choice. More specifically, the presence or absence of a solid social network, or at least how the woman perceives this, is essential within this process of choice. Often, women do not perceive alternative ways of action. They might feel that they can’t count on anybody to solve their problem(s), which results in choosing the criminal path. In short, a life in isolation, and more specifically (the feeling of) being deprived from social contacts might explain why women in a precarious life context take the actual step towards crime.
Conclusion

Because Belgian research on female prisoners is scant, little is known about the life histories of these women and their pathways to prison. In this contribution we explored some results of a recent PhD study on female prisoners’ life histories and criminal careers in Flanders. This small-scale research confirms other international studies which have shown that the life history of female prisoners is characterised by vulnerabilities on several domains. The most important one is relational vulnerability. The lack of mutual empathic relationships and the occurrence of abusive relationships throughout life, is the most recurring and important topic within the life histories. Within the pathways to crime abusive romantic relationships play the most important role. This might explain the importance of adult-onset pathways for female offenders. First, abusive romantic relationships mostly occur (or escalate) in adulthood. Second, it is often the accumulation of several vulnerabilities (in some cases ‘catalysed’ by abusive relationships) that leads to the emergence of criminal behaviour. Based on the life histories we can conclude that this accumulation usually emerges in adulthood.

The results indicate that life events and social context in adulthood matter. This contradicts theories postulating that criminal careers can be predicted solely based on childhood risk factors. Our research revealed that women with very diverse childhood backgrounds often cover the same pathway in adulthood. This might be explained by the importance of abusive romantic relationships in adulthood (Nuytiens, Christiaens, 2010), but more research is needed in order to explore this hypothesis.
References


An Nuytiens, Jenneke Christiaens


An Nuytiens, Jenneke Christiaens


An Nuytiens
Jenneke Christiaens

Put žena izvršiteljki krivičnih dela do zatvora u Belgiji

Ovaj rad se bavi rezultatima istraživanja ličnih istorija žena izvršiteljki i putem koji ih je doveo do zatvora u Belgiji. Biće prezentovani putevi žena u kriminal i istraženo kako su ti putevi povezani sa ličnim istorijama ovih žena. Istraživanje je pokazalo da je veći deo ispitivane populacije počeo da se bavi kriminalom u odraslim (zrelom) dobu. Autorke ukazuju da bi veliki broj prestupnica u odraslim dobu mogao biti objašnjen pojavom rodnih vulnerabilnosti u toku života tih žena, koje se obično ne akumuliraju pre odraslog doba.

Ključne reči: žene u zatvoru, lične istorije, kriminalna karijera, prestupnici u odraslim dobu.