

Older Women in Prison: The Chilean case

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Overview

Previous Research

- Less visible than older men (more ignored, less policies or programmes)
- Minority within a minority.
- However, they are normally over-represented (live longer than men).
- Normally they are considered “old” from 50 years old
- Very low reoffending rate: ““the lowest recidivism rates of all prisoners. It is crucial to determine whether continually incarcerating a person who is of little, if any, risk to society is feasible” (Williams and Rikard, 2004, p. 135)

- Offending pattern: drugs or property offences
 - Usually non-violent offenders
 - Stereotype of being an “old lady” and “show passivity, weakness, and polite manners” (Shantz and Frigon, 2009, p. 4)
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- 3 Layers of vulnerability (Handtke et al 2015)
 - 1. Prisoners (poor quality of life, loss of autonomy)
 - 2. Women (minority group, vulnerabilities around their social relationship)
 - 3. Older persons (minority within a minority, ageing problems)

Methodology and participants

Qualitative

Exploratory

Interviews:

1. Online (using MS Teams)

2. Semi structured (open ended questions allowing discussion).

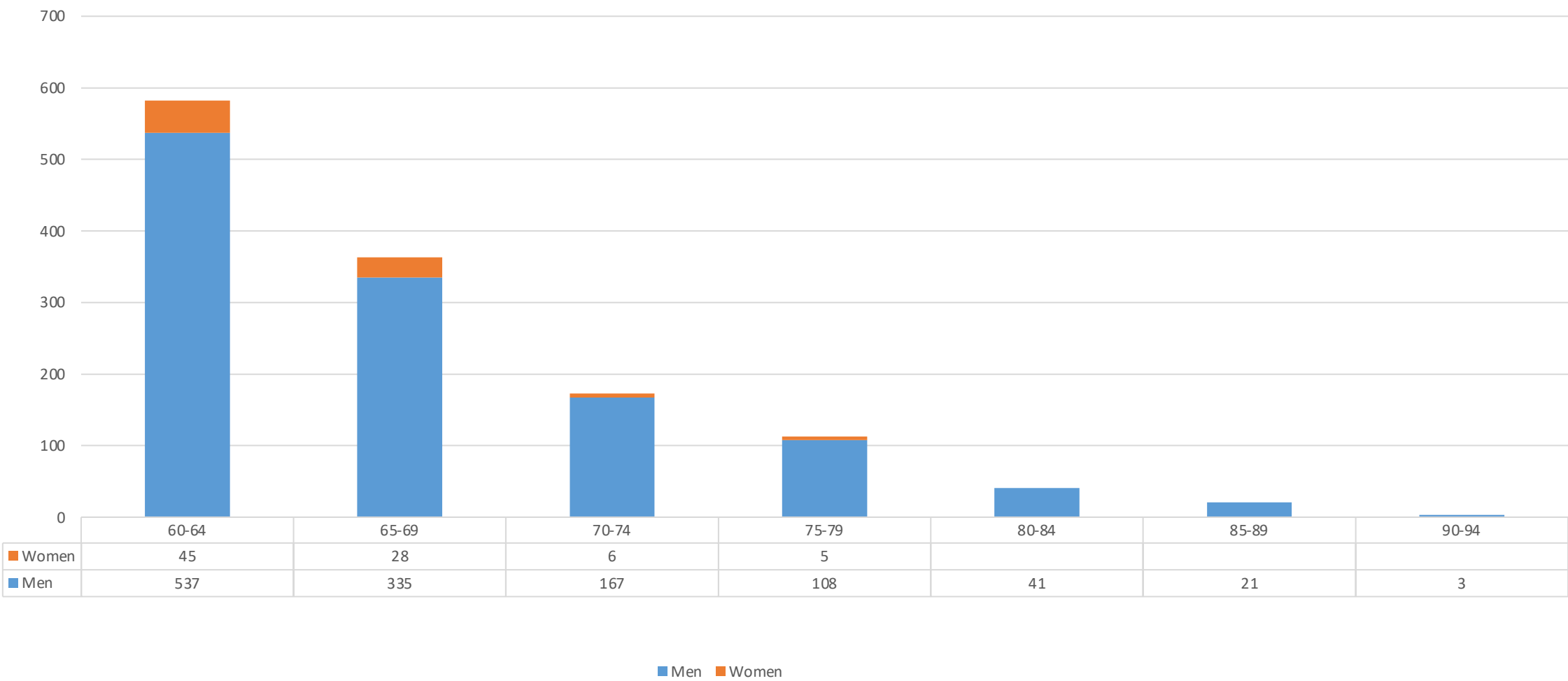
3. one/ two hours

- Practitioners: 22 interviews
- People that work or have work with elderlies in prison (even if they didn't work exclusively with them).
- 6 NGOs / 1 academia / 17 Government (SENAMA, GENCHI, INDH, DPP, PJ)
- 6 interviewees work / worked with older women in prison
- AND information from the Chilean Prison Service (GENCHI)

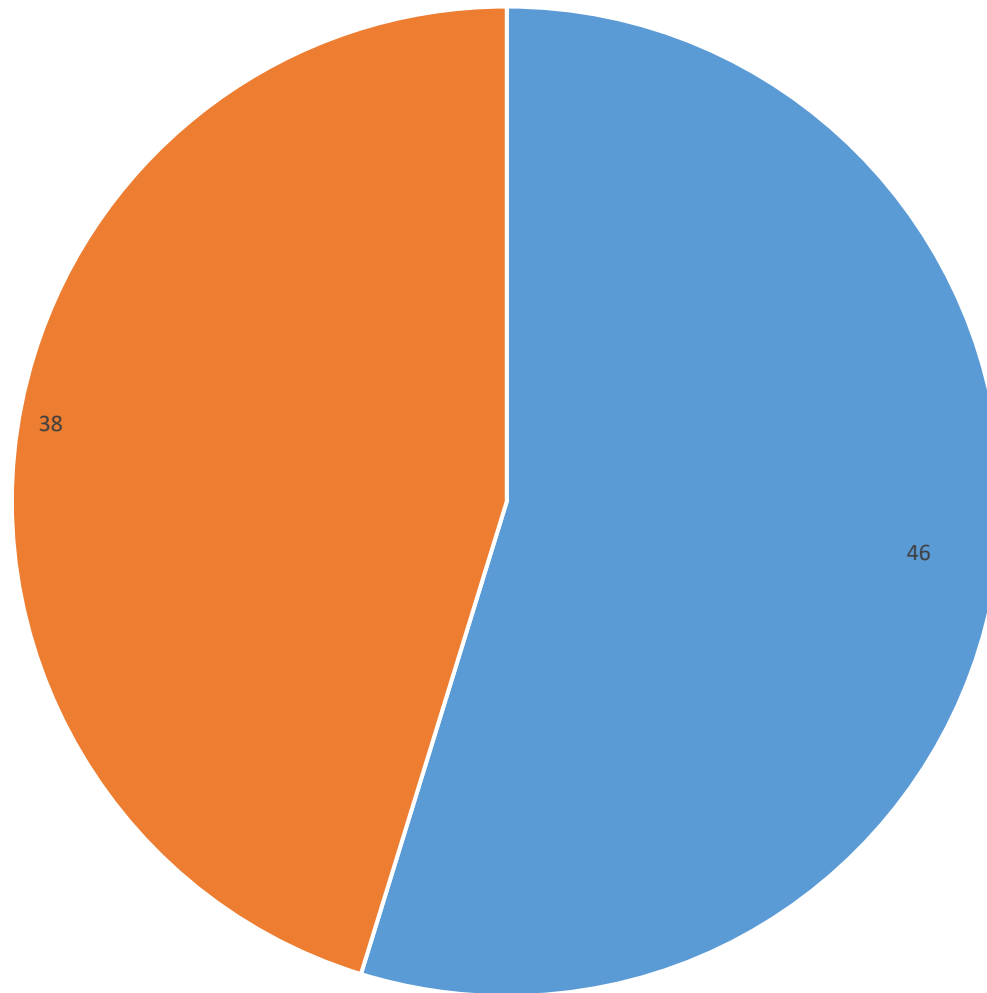
Key Findings

Women represent 6.5% of older prisoners (60 years or more)

Older Prisoners in Chile (January 2022)

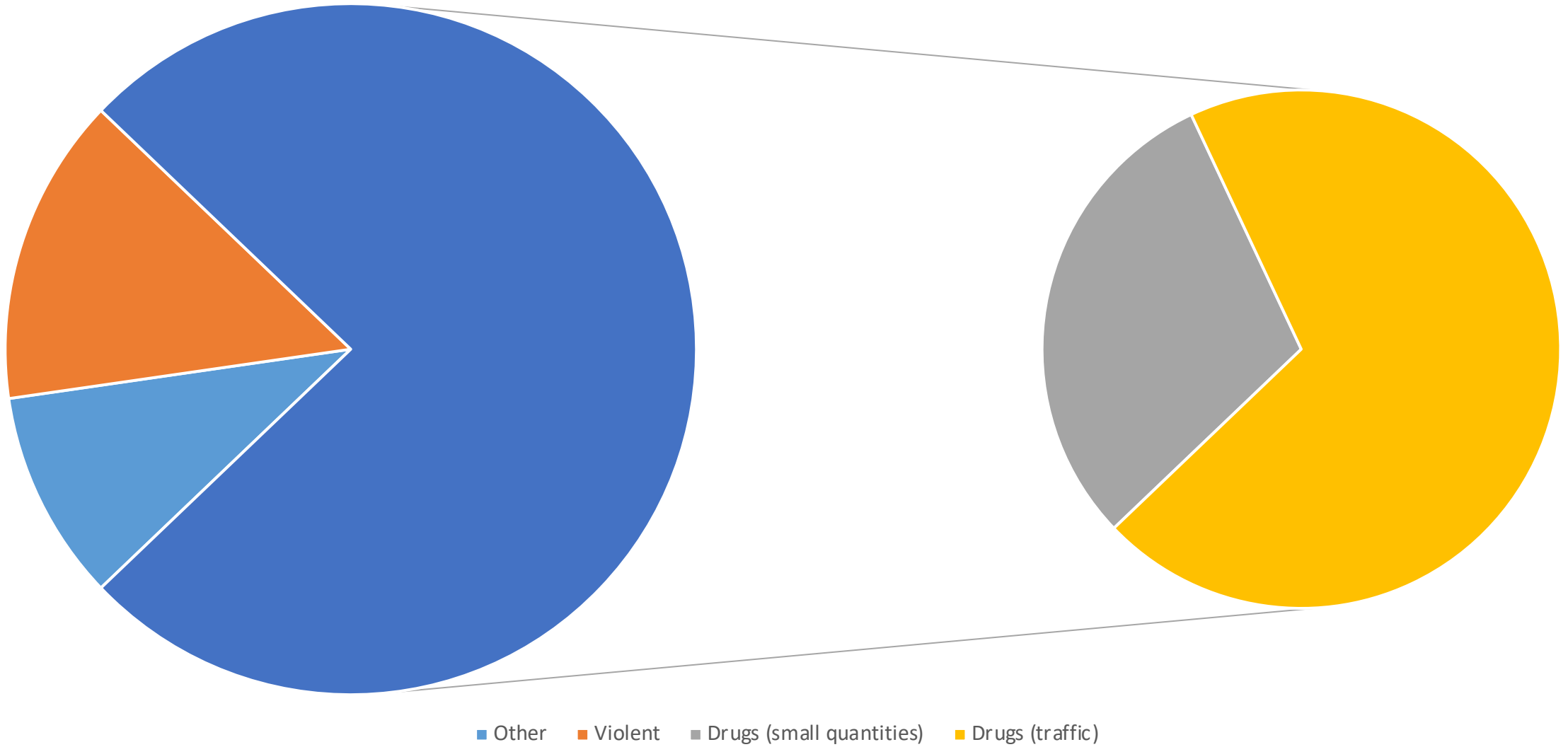


Women Legal Status



■ Convicted ■ On remand

Crimes



Drug related offences

- “There are many older women who assume responsibility when drug crimes are committed by other family members. That is a dynamic that is repeated, that when I interview them they tell me that they are not, they are not traffickers, that the drug was never theirs and they assume that role so that another family member does not have to live the deprivation of liberty.” (Patricia)

Women's prisons in Chile

- "collection houses" owned by the State, but administered by Las Esclavas de Jesus, a Catholic congregation where women were sought to amend their path through prayer.
- In 1864 they were completely transferred to the Congregation of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd
- 1981: women officers trained in the Gendarmeria
- 1996: the prisons ceased to depend on the Catholic Church to become part of the state penitentiary system

Space

- “In those years, all these girls who had nowhere to live, girls who had problems with drugs, alcohol and who were homeless, the nuns picked them up and took them to this kind of boarding school. That's how it was born.” (veronica)
- “It is not the modular structure as it is in the rest of the prisons.(...) Because it was not a prison as such. In other words, they left their section and found a little path that went past a wall that was not even a wall. It was like a mesh that had to separate the sector where the inmates were confined from the house of the nuns. It was divided by a mesh and in the other sector there were grapevines, fruit trees, a lot of grass inside a prison (...) (Veronica).

Sorority

- “The women are all mixed up too, well, because it happens that the prisons, as they are smaller, have a single module in general for all of them” (Lorna)
- "It's not like an older women comes and you say 'she's going there because of her criminal history, it's her turn to be on the worst section', and that's where she goes, left to her fate. No, it's not like that. In other words, the most appropriate criterion is still sought. As I tell you, in these minimum conditions, minimum but a little, we help them to do their stay a little more, in quotes, pleasant”
- “Young women kind of adopt them. They call them “mamita” (mummy)
- "We cannot leave everything to sorority."

Concluding Comments

- The “war on drugs” has a strong relation with the presence of older women in prison.
- The historical context and setting of female prisons in Chile helps to create a more “friendly” and inclusive environment.
- They receive less visitors and tend to find a “new family” within the prison.
- Sorority is essential for their wellbeing. Without the help and support of other women (other prisoners or prison staff) they would not cover their basic needs (soap, shampoo).
- Disclaimer: there are issues that are relevant for both, older men and women, like access to health care, fear of dying in prison or the lack of activities but I focused this presentation on issues specifically related to being an older woman.

Q&A

- Further questions: daniela.mardones-bravo@ed.ac.uk