



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/ijlcrj](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/ijlcrj)

INTERNATIONAL
JOURNAL OF
LAW
CRIME
AND
JUSTICE

# Vulnerabilities, victimisation, romance and indulgence: Thai women's pathways to prison in Cambodia for international cross border drug trafficking

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Women  
Drug trafficking  
Southeast Asia  
Feminist pathways

## ABSTRACT

There is an extensive body of western research exploring women's pathways to prison. These studies show that the lives of convicted women are typically characterised by extensive childhood and/or adulthood victimisation, mental ill health, men's influence/control and economic marginalisation. Non-western feminist pathways research is nevertheless sparse as are studies on women imprisoned for drug trafficking. Using life history interviews with Thai foreign national women imprisoned in Cambodia for international cross-border drug trafficking, this paper explores the circumstances and criminal justice experiences propelling them into prison. Results reveal four distinct pathways to prison: 1) the criminogenic pathway, 2) the romantic susceptibility pathway, 3) the domestic violence pathway, 4) the self-indulgent pathway.

## 1. Introduction

The 'war on drugs' (global and domestic), ensuing prohibitionist policies and harsh punishment for drug related crime, has led to significant growth in women's incarceration numbers across the globe (Banks, 2011; Unlu and Ekici, 2012: 298–299; Kensy et al., 2012: 3; Barnoux and Wood, 2013: 24; Fleetwood, 2014: 8). Drug trafficking offences, for example, account for a disproportionate number of women in many prison systems (Banks, 2011; Barnoux and Wood, 2013: 24; Fleetwood, 2014: 8). Although the majority of people arrested for drug trafficking are men, women comprise a not insignificant minority. The United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs estimates that women represent around 20% of the drug traffickers arrested world-wide and since the war on drugs, prison populations have evidenced a steady increase in the number of women incarcerated for this type of offending (Unlu and Ekici, 2012: 298–299; Kensy, et., al., 2012: 3; Fleetwood, 2014: 8).

While research on women's participation in cross-border international drug trafficking is sparse, being limited to only a handful of studies undertaken in Europe or the Americas, results show that women are most frequently drug couriers who carry drugs across international borders for someone else (Kensy et al., 2012: 3; Fleetwood, 2014: 7). Generally, women drug couriers are not career criminals (i.e. habitual/repeat offenders), most are first-time offenders and few have established links to criminal organisations (Huling, 1995: 15; Unlu and Ekici, 2012: 299). The role of women drug couriers tends to be characterised by a lack of control. They

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<sup>1</sup> The viewpoints, findings and conclusions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the view of the Thailand Institute of Justice.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijlcrj.2018.12.001>

Received 29 June 2018; Received in revised form 6 December 2018; Accepted 21 December 2018  
1756-0616/ © 2018 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

are frequently unaware of what they are carrying and are exploited to varying degrees (Fleetwood and Haas, 2011: 380; Stengel and Fleetwood, 2014: 2).

Women living with vulnerabilities are often targeted and groomed into offending by recruiters, the pay is low and the risk of being apprehended and imprisoned are high (Kensy et al., 2012: 4–5). Women drug couriers are frequently under-educated, impoverished and primarily responsible for familial economic provisioning. It is often this position of vulnerability, resulting from economic insecurity and the confines of women's gendered social realities as familial caretakers, which compels them into trafficking drugs for the money. Other typical vulnerabilities include extensive victimisation histories, associated trauma, and general life chaos which increase susceptibility to recruiters (see Dorado 1998 cited in Diaz-Cotto, 2005: 146–147; Sudbury, 2005; Bailey, 2013, Fleetwood, 2014).

Some women drug couriers are subjected to abuse, violence, threats, coercion, manipulation and deception including unknowingly transporting drugs and being used a decoys<sup>2</sup> (Unlu and Ekici, 2012: 300; Kensy et al., 2012: 3; Fleetwood, 2014: 964; Fleetwood et al., 2015: 1). Subsequently, it has been argued that women drug couriers are in fact victims of human trafficking because many are being moved from one nation to another under circumstances of force, threat, coercion, fraud and/or deception for the purpose of exploitation (Fleetwood, 2014: 964). Despite this, the global use of rationalised sentencing models that assume individual choice, responsibility and minimise the significance of social inequality and vulnerability, ensure that harsh penalties are applied regardless of culpability, mitigating circumstances and/or the collateral damage caused by incarceration (Fleetwood and Haas, 2011; Kensy et al., 2012: 8; Fleetwood et al., 2015: 1).

This article reports findings from in-depth life history interviews with Thai foreign national women imprisoned in Cambodia for international cross-border drug trafficking. A feminist pathways approach, common in western criminology, is utilised to explore and map these women's narrations of their journeys into prison. This research contributes to understandings of women who traffic drugs beyond Europe and the Americas, whilst also providing a starting point from which to build a new Southeast Asian knowledge in the area. The paper begins with a discussion of the extant literature. The methodological approach is then explained, findings presented and the research results positioned within the broader subject field. Study limitations are also highlighted alongside directions for further research.

## 2. Literature review: feminist pathways and women drug couriers

Two bodies of literature informed this research: 1) the feminist pathways to crime framework, 2) prior studies on women drug traffickers. An overview of these bodies of literature is presented below.

### 2.1. Feminist pathways

The seminal work of Daly (1994) spurred an ongoing interest among western feminist criminologists in exploring women's pathways to offending and criminalisation. A feminist pathways approach adopts a 'whole of life' methodology, which frequently draws on life history interviews to map the experiences and circumstances that lead women into the criminal justice system (Bloom et al., 2004: 37; Wattanaporn and Holtfreter, 2014).

Western feminist pathways scholars maintain that the offending of women and their criminalisation is largely survival based and tied to a grouping of interrelated and interconnected factors. These include extensive childhood and adulthood victimisation, mental ill health (including drug/alcohol abuse), economic marginalisation, men's influence/control and familial caretaking responsibilities (Daly, 1994; Salisbury and Van Voorhis, 2009; Simpson et al., 2008; Stalans, 2009; White, 2008; Owen et al., 2017: 24–36).

Daly's (1994) formative research was the first attempt made by western feminist scholars to comparatively explore women's pathways into the criminal justice system. Using court files, Daly (1994: 46–58) examined convicted offenders' life stories ( $n = 40$  women) from which she constructed a typology of pathways. The following five typologies were identified:

1. **Harmed and harming women** ( $n = 15$ ). All these women had suffered neglect, physical and/or sexual abuse as children. By adolescence they were identified as troublesome youths with substance misuse problems. For these women, the harm experienced growing up manifested itself in harming others and most were eventually convicted for committing offences of interpersonal violence.
2. **Street women** ( $n = 10$ ). These women were either pushed out or ran away from abusive homes or were drawn to the excitement of life on the street. Here they got involved in petty hustles, became drug addicted, engaged in criminal activities such as prostitution, theft and drug dealing, in order to support their drug habit and for survival. Their criminal histories were lengthy, with their offending behaviors related to their life on the streets.
3. **Battered women** ( $n = 5$ ). Battered women had generally first experienced abuse later in life (rather than as children), and this abuse occurred within their relationships with intimate partners. All of these women were in relationships with domestically violent men and their offending was directly related to these relationships.
4. **Drug connected women** ( $n = 6$ ). These women were engaged in drug offending that was attributed to the men (boyfriends,

<sup>2</sup> The deployment of decoy drug couriers is done to distract the attention of law enforcement official who will sometimes be 'tipped off' about the decoy entering the country. Multiple drug couriers will be recruited and travel together; even if a few get caught the rest may go through unnoticed and the operation will still be profitable to drug trafficking organisations (Unlu and Ekici, 2012: 300).

husbands, family members) in their lives.

5. Other (n = 4). None of these women appeared to have problems with substance misuse (or other mental ill-health). They had not experienced family violence (either in childhood or adulthood) nor had they lived on the street, and they had no previous arrest or conviction history. Criminality for this group was related to immediate economic circumstance or greed. Subsequent feminist scholars have labelled this group economically motivated (Simpson et al., 2008: 85–86; Wattanaporn and Holtfreter, 2014: 3–4).

Daly's (1994) framework has been reassessed and further developed by a number of western researchers. This scholarship has generally supported core aspects of Daly's (1994) work. For example, Simpson et al. (2008) used quantitative factor analyses and found factors representing Daly's (1994) pathways including "street", "harmed and harming", "drug-connected" and "battered" women. Most recently, using a qualitative methodology including open-ended interviews with imprisoned women, Dehart (2018, 2005) also identified prison trajectories in line with Daly's (1994).

There are a growing number of studies on women's pathways to prison in non-western countries (Kim et al., 2007; Berko et al., 2010; Cherukuri et al., 2009; Artz et al., 2012; Havanon et al., 2012a; Havanon et al., 2012b; Khalid and Khan, 2013; Jeffries and Chuenurah, 2018; Shen, 2015; Shechory et al., 2011). As in the western literature, histories of victimisation, women's relationships with men, economic marginalisation and familial economic provisioning present as crucial pathways to women's imprisonment. In addition, the non-western research consistently highlights other factors operating within women's pathways to prison, including limited access to justice, comparatively unjust and/or corrupted criminal justice processes. The influence of deviant peer groups also comes to the foreground more frequently. Here friendships with deviant/criminal people are central to women's journeys into prison. Women are either pushed out of problematic home environments into a deviant peer group or are drawn away from loving parents by these friendships. These deviant peer group associations then lead women down a path to offending and eventual incarceration (Cherukuri et al., 2009; Shechory et al., 2011; Havanon et al., 2012a).

These commonalities and differences for women across societies warrant further description and examination, especially as the research in non-western contexts remains relatively embryonic. The current research is concerned with describing and examining Thai women's pathways to prison in Cambodia for international cross-border drug trafficking. Although it is common practice within feminist pathway's scholarship (particularly in the west) to amalgamate offenders' life histories, mapping pathways for cohorts of women convicted of various types of offences, this is potentially problematic because trajectories into prison vary by offence. This is demonstrated above and further illustrated below in an overview of three non-western studies, including from Thailand, investigating women's pathways to prison for different crimes but which, given the focus of the current research, also include incarceration for drug offending.

Research in Israel examining differences in women's pathways to prison for drugs, violence and fraud related crimes showed variance in prison trajectories by offence. Compared to those women serving time for fraud and violent crimes, drug offenders had more troubled lives. Exposure to childhood abuse, drug use and family conflict were more commonly reflected in their pathways, as was association with deviant peer groups and engagement in prior deviant and/or criminal activity (Shechory et al., 2011).

Havanon et al. (2012a) explored the life stories of various groups of women inmates sentenced in Thailand's prisons including "talks" and in-depth interviews with a select sample of prisoners.<sup>3</sup> Although the research methodology, including sample selection and the content of the researchers' "talks" and interviews were unclear, results suggested that while domestic violence victimisation may be a precursor for women killing or attempting to kill their husbands, drug and property offending was primarily motivated by monetary greed. In some cases, women reported finding themselves in prison for drug offending as a result of unwittingly associating with others (i.e. friends and/or romantic partners) who were actively engaged in this type of offending or being deceived into committing the offence due to naivety. Once women entered the criminal justice system, corrupt, unjust and misguided police practices alongside a lack of competent legal representation in court were key drivers behind the incarceration.

Subsequent in-depth analysis of women drug offenders' life stories by the same group of Thai researchers, suggested that their criminality was at the lower end of the seriousness scale and occurred within contexts beyond women's control (Havanon et al., 2012b). Like Daly's (1994) "drug connected" women, those interviewed described being embroiled in the criminal justice system as a result of guilt by association or via arrest as co-conspirators during police "sting" operations that were primarily targeted at men with whom they were having a romantic relationship. This suggests that the action of a romantic partner, coupled with injustice in legal process, may account for the imprisonment of some women for drug offences in the Thai context. However, Havanon and colleagues' (2012a) case study sample was purposefully selected in order to explore the injustice of the criminal justice system for women, and its broader application is therefore limited.

## 2.2. Women drug couriers

Studies concerned specifically with women drug traffickers are limited in number, scope and breadth. To date, the focus has been on women imprisoned for trafficking in either Europe or the Americas. The primary aims of these investigations have been to understand the gendered impact of the global war on drugs, the role played by women in the global illicit drug market, the immediate motivations behind their offending, the degree to which they 'freely chose' to traffic drugs, and their experiences within foreign

<sup>3</sup> The following women were included in this study, those who had delivered and cared for children inside the prison, were very young when entering the prison, were able to start new lives within the prison, able to maintain familial bonds, were physically and mentally abused by their husbands/partners and had killed or attempted to kill them.

systems of criminal justice. Each of the studies reviewed below have taken a broadly feminist approach and provided invaluable knowledge about an understudied and especially marginalised group of women however, none have specifically applied a feminist pathways perspective (see Dorado 1998 cited in Juantia Diaz-Cotto, 2005: 146–147; Sudbury, 2005; Bailey, 2013, Fleetwood, 2014).

Dorado (1998 cited in Juantia Diaz-Cotto, 2005: 146–147), interviewed Colombian women imprisoned for drug trafficking in Europe. She found that these women commonly faced poverty, were financially responsible for children and often times other family members and had limited education. Given their economic marginalisation, those women who chose to traffic drugs did so for the money because they needed to provide for themselves and their families. Others had been tricked into trafficking by friends, acquaintances or men with whom they were intimately involved. Some were coerced into trafficking with the lives of their children and other family members threatened if they refused. The women were frequently unaware of type, amount or value of the drugs they were carrying and once arrested, were subjected to long periods of questioning, isolation and incarceration. Few were provided with interpreters during criminal proceedings and there was a general lack of adequate legal representation. These factors combined made it difficult for adequate defences to be mounted.

Sudbury (2005: 171–175) undertook interviews with women imprisoned in the United Kingdom for drug trafficking (including British and foreign nationals). Most ethnic minority women, including those from Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, were first-time offenders, often serving lengthy sentences. This group of women gave three explanations for their predicament. First, some stated that they had been tricked into carrying drugs by friends or romantic partners (always men). These claims were seldom considered by judges who viewed the drugs in these women's possession as prima facie evidence of guilt. Second, others said that they had been coerced or intimidated into trafficking (i.e. threats of violence against the women, their children or other family members) by men who dealt drugs or members of organised criminal groups. Third, the majority of women nevertheless acknowledged that they chose to carry the drugs in exchange for money but this choice was executed within a limited context i.e. economic insecurity. Further, none had knowledge of the international drug trade. Pre-arrest their only contact was via an intermediary (always a man), who approached them, supplied the package and instructions around what they would and would not do. Rather than being a partnership, the women's relationship with men traffickers or recruiters was deemed exploitative. Sudbury (2005: 175) concludes that even when agreeing to carry the drugs women are exploited, poorly remunerated and ultimately disposable workers of the global drug industry.

More recently, Bailey's (2013) research on women imprisoned for drug trafficking in Barbados identified poverty as the most significant motivator behind women's choice to offend (Bailey, 2013: 135). Some women had also experienced family violence either in childhood or adulthood and as a result of this "chaos in their lives", had turned to crime. In a smaller number of cases, women's narratives revealed being involved in drug trafficking as a result of their romantic relationships. Here, women either unknowingly transported drugs because they were duped by their romantic partners (always men) or chose to act as drug couriers in order to gain favour from the men they loved (Bailey, 2013: 136). One participant revealed that her participation in drug trafficking was motivated by "greed", wanting "nice things", to "look good", the "rush, thrill [and addictive] power" of offending (Bailey, 2013: 134–135).

Fleetwood (2014: 160–164) critically reflects on the tendency of popular (and some academic) discourse to essentialise women drug couriers as victims devoid of agency. Drawing on extensive ethnographic research and interviews with drug traffickers, Fleetwood (2014) explored the lived experiences of women imprisoned for drug trafficking in Ecuador. Similar to the earlier research she found that a handful of respondents recounted being coerced or threatened into carrying drugs. A small number also described carrying drugs that had been put in their luggage without their knowledge. However, these narratives of coercion and trickery were atypical. Instead the most common story told was one of poverty and economic provisioning for families (including their children). Rather than being compelled by others, the women often felt compelled by their gendered responsibilities and roles. Women's involvement in trafficking could thus be understood as a rational and intentional response to the feminisation of poverty (Silvestri and Crowther-Dowey, 2016: 80). Certainly, most considered themselves voluntary participants. Instead of being exploited these women could be viewed as expressing choice within the confines of their gendered social realities and thus, both victims and agents.

In criminology, feminist pathways scholars look not only at what motivates women to offend but also explore in-depth the historical contexts of women's lives that lead them on journeys to criminalisation. By addressing the unique combination of frequently interconnected and interrelated life history experiences (from childhood through to adulthood) pathways scholarship has generated a more nuanced understanding of criminalised women. This knowledge has in turn impacted the advancement of gender specific policy and practice to better meet the needs of women in the criminal justice system. Within domestic borders salient contributions include the incorporation of gender-responsive correctional treatment, programs and prison environments that are sensitive to the unique life circumstances and realities of women's experiences (Wattanaporn and Holtfreter, 2014: 12). Globally, the impact of pathways feminism is evidenced in 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 on 21 December 2010, this is the first international instrument to provide specific and detailed guidelines on responding to the gender specific needs of women in the criminal justice system (Thailand Institute of Justice, 2014: 10). To this end, further research expanding the pathways framework to include different cultural contexts is needed.

The current study extends the feminist pathways perspective beyond western societal contexts and contributes to understandings of women drug traffickers beyond Europe and the Americas. Employing life history interviews with Thai foreign nationals imprisoned in Cambodia for drug trafficking, this research explores and maps the life circumstances and criminal justice experiences that resulted in these women's criminalisation and eventual incarceration.

### 3. Data and method

As noted above, studies of women cross-border drug traffickers are limited and non-western feminist pathways scholarship has only recently emerged. This research is the first in Cambodia and Southeast Asia to explore women's pathways to prison for international cross border drug trafficking. This study provides women a voice that has not been part of the literature to date.

As is common in the feminist pathways approach, a narrative analysis of life history interviews is utilised. Narrative analysis focuses on the ways in which people construct and use stories to interpret the world. It does not treat the narratives as stories that transmit a set of facts and is not primarily interested in whether the stories are true or not (Ignatow and Michalcea, 2016; Presser, 2009). Narratives are social products that are produced by people in the context of specific social, historical and cultural locations. They are interpretive devices through which people represent themselves and their social realities to others (Fleetwood et al., 2015; Lynch et al., 2012; Presser, 2009). As feminist researchers, the authors' methodological approach was to provide marginalised women with a forum in which they could tell their stories. As feminists criminologists the authors strongly adhere to the view that women are experts in their own lives.

The interview schedule was open-ended, consisting of women's responses to broad discussion topics. This approach provided women the opportunity to describe significant events in their lives and analyse links between their varied life experiences and criminalisation. The topics canvassed in the interviews included relationships (familial, friendships and romantic), victimisation experiences, education, employment, economic circumstances, health, substance (mis)use, offending, interaction with and experiences with the criminal justice system.

Ten in-depth life history interviews were conducted with women. At the time of this study there were a total of  $n = 17$  Thai foreign national women incarcerated in Cambodia. All the women were informed about the research by the prison staff and asked if they would like to participate. None turned down the invitation. However, strict time constraints imposed by the prison meant interviews with all  $n = 17$  women were not possible.

At the beginning of each interview the aim of the study, confidentiality, anonymity and voluntary nature of participation was explained to participants before verbal consent<sup>4</sup> was obtained. Anonymity was further protected by assigning each woman a pseudonym, changing story details that had no bearing on the research purpose, aggregating descriptive data and not directly connecting individuals with trafficked drug amounts and sentence lengths.<sup>5</sup>

The interviews lasted from between one and two hours, were conducted in Thai and translated into English by one of the authors. The use of recording devices was prohibited so comprehensive notes were taken during the interview. These were either hand written, or typed in the prisons where laptop computers were allowed. In the cases where hand written notes were used, these were typed immediately following the interviews to ensure the information was recorded accurately and comprehensively. The women's narratives were then collated into life maps and synthesised and into four distinct pathways to prison. In order to establish inter-coder reliability the authors worked together to construct the pathways.

### 4. Research results

In this section results from the narrative analysis are reported following a descriptive overview of the women interviewed. The latter provides a cross-sectional view of the research participants. The former paints a more nuanced picture of the life circumstances, experiences and events constituting their pathways to prison. In other words, the descriptive over-view is more fully illuminated through the narrative analysis (Daly, 1994: 45).

#### 4.1. Demographic profiles and sentence length

The women were aged 24–47 years. Only two had completed high school, six identified as Buddhist and four identified as Christian. Prior to their arrest, all of the women interviewed except one, a sex worker, earned below the average Thai monthly income (see Table 1).<sup>6</sup>

In Cambodia, offenders who possess, use, or traffic illegal drugs can face severe penalties incorporating large fines and long prison sentences including life imprisonment. The penalties for drug offences vary depending on types and quantities of illicit drug. According to Article 40 of the *Law on Control of Drug* (2012), a person who traffics more than 80 g of heroin or cocaine can face imprisonment from 20 to 30 years or life imprisonment, and a fine from 40, 000, 000 to 100, 000, 000 Riels (approximately 9900–24,700 USD). Also, extra penalties can be added if the offence is proved to be carried out by a criminal group.<sup>7</sup> In line with Cambodia's 'hard line' on drug trafficking prison sentences were lengthy, ranging from 25 years to life (see Table 1, above).

<sup>4</sup> The authors did not ask for written informed consent for two reasons. First, it was felt that participants may feel uncomfortable if presented with official looking documents requiring signatures given the well documented and more than likely, first-hand experience of corruption in Cambodia's criminal justice system. Second, prisoners have high rates of illiteracy particularly in developing nations.

<sup>5</sup> Ethical clearance for this research was granted by the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee.

<sup>6</sup> The average monthly income in Thailand in 2016 was 13,803 THB per month (approximately 430 USD) (see <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/thailand/wages>).

<sup>7</sup> Article 59–60 of the Law on Control of Drug (2012) of Cambodia.

**Table 1**  
Participant's age, education, religion, income and sentence length.

	<i>N</i> = 10
<i>Age</i>	
24–29 years	2
30–39 years	7
40–49 years	1
<i>Education Level</i>	
Never attended school	1
Grades 6-8	3
Grades 9-11	4
Completed high school	2
<i>Religion</i>	
Buddhist	6
Christian	4
<i>Monthly Income</i>	
6000–7000 THB (approximately 187-220 USD)	3
7001–8000 THB (approximately 221-251 USD)	2
8001–10,000 THB (approximately 252-312 USD)	4
Over 13,000 THB (over 400 USD)	1
<i>Sentence Length</i>	
25 years	2
30 years	5
Life	3

#### 4.2. Childhood experiences

The women's childhood familial relationships and experiences were less than positive. All but one woman reported experiencing an unstable childhood characterised by one or more of the following: financial problems, separation from parents, parental divorce, living with parental alcohol abuse or other addictions, family violence, abuse and/or neglect. In addition, three women reported being involved with a deviant peer group.

#### 4.3. Relational experiences in adulthood and criminal histories

All of the women had experienced a least one significant romantic relationship in their lives and all but two had children. Every woman had endured intimate partnerships marred by at least one of the following: domestic violence, spousal substance misuse, criminality, infidelity, failure to provide financially for the family. While none had previously been arrested, four had been involved in previous criminal activity (i.e. using, dealing and trafficking drugs although only one woman participated in the latter) without coming to the attention of the criminal justice system.

#### 4.4. Health

Alcohol addiction was described by two women but none reported problems with illicit drug use, although three had taken drugs. Poor physical health was reported by two women and two had mental health problems (i.e. anxiety and depression).

#### 4.5. Offence profiles

Six of the women were convicted of trafficking Cocaine but 'Ice' (methamphetamine) featured in three cases. Drug weights varied from 700 g to 13 kg and all of the women could be classified as drug couriers who carried drugs across international borders for someone else. One woman did not want to discuss the type or amount of drugs that she was convicted of trafficking.

#### 4.6. Experiences with the cambodian criminal justice system

The women's stories of their experiences with the Cambodian criminal justice system were generally negative. The majority reported poor treatment at the hands of the police and while all were provided with legal representation at some point in the court process, lawyers were frequently described as being of little use. Most women had interpreters during their court proceedings but at the police investigation stage, many did not. Overall, every woman except one expressed feeling unfairly treated by the criminal justice system (see Table 2).

#### 4.7. Results from the narrative analyses

In the previous section a cross-sectional view of the research participants was provided. The narrative analyses presented below

**Table 2**  
Interactions with and experiences with the criminal justice system.

	N = 10
Poorly treated by police	7
Interpreter provided during police investigation	4
Had legal representation at court	10
Lawyer useful	1
Interpreter provided during court hearings	8
Treated unfairly by the criminal justice system	9

paints a more nuanced picture (Daly, 1994: 45). Four common themes or pathways emerged from the analysis of the women's stories: 1) the criminogenic pathway, 2) the romantic susceptibility pathway, 3) the domestic violence pathway, 4) the self-indulgent pathway. Each are discussed in detail below but before doing so it is important to note a number of overarching themes that united many of these women.

#### 4.7.1. Overarching themes

Overall, the analyses revealed an inter-relatedness of life experiences resulting in a set of vulnerabilities that restrained and shaped the women's choices propelling them towards the circumstances for which they ended up incarcerated (Artz et al., 2012: 74). While every woman's life story was unique, there were common experiences of individual, relational and/or social vulnerability. At the individual level these vulnerabilities manifest in low self-esteem or self-worth, psychological problems and addiction to alcohol. Relational vulnerabilities included unstable childhood familial relationships, problematic intimate relationships, familial caretaking and responsibility, and/or association with deviant peers. Social vulnerabilities were evidenced in the women's tenuous position in society, the most important of which were low levels of education, limited employment prospects and financial difficulties (Nuytiens and Christiaens, 2016: 25). In addition to the life history vulnerabilities experienced, once arrested, most women expressed suffering varying levels of injustice by the Cambodian criminal justice system.

Many of the women reported experiencing corrupt, unjust and misguided police practices alongside a lack of competent legal representation in court. At the level of policing, half the women were unaware of what was taking place or what documents they were endorsing. Kwanjai for example was not provided with an interpreter at the police station, and was told and subsequently made to sign a statement written in Khmer<sup>8</sup> that was “*nothing like what I told the police*”. Piti was told to sign “*two pieces of blank paper*” which the police then filled in as her statement in Khmer. While not related to their cases *per se*, some women also had their belongings taken away by the police and/or were asked to sign forms requesting supplies from the Thai Embassy that they never received. Siriporn describes her experiences with the police as follows:

*They ask me to put my fingerprints on Khmer documents and a blank paper. They ask me to fill in a form to request 100USD from the Embassy to buy me things. I never received anything. Another police officer took my mobile phone because he wanted a better phone for Facebook.*

Ratree explains how she felt intimidated into signing her statement by police:

*They ask me to sign documents in Khmer. No one read the document to me. The police was rude. He threaten me and he hit me on my head one time, so I signed the paper. They also take my money and all my possessions.*

At court most of the women had an interpreter from the Thai Embassy and everyone had legal representation at some point in the process. However, in many cases the women were not given the opportunity to consult with their lawyers prior to their first court hearing and even then, court appointed lawyers in particular, often failed to speak to them. Kamon states, “*I had a court lawyer but he never speak to me, just sat there [in the courtroom], just to be there*”.

Overall, none of the women felt fairly treated by the criminal justice system. A number of reasons were given for this. The women were confused about criminal justice processes and expressed that there was a general lack of investigation into their cases. They felt unheard and subsequently silenced by the police and courts. Kulap states:

*They (police and courts) don't listen to what you have to say. I was trying to explain to the court that the drug was hidden neatly in that luggage without my knowledge. I wouldn't have carried it if I knew what was in it. The court said it doesn't matter that I didn't know.*

Kamon expresses her sense of injustice as follows:

*I do not think I was fairly treated by the criminal justice system. There was no investigation so the only evidence is my suitcase with the drugs in it, no other evidence. The police ask me lots of questions but the same ones over and over again.*

In court, undue weight was thought to be given to police statements that were signed or finger printed when the women did not understand what these documents contained. Kwanjai states:

*I felt that they [court] were unfair to me because they just look at the evidence which is the cocaine and just say that is mine. They just used*

<sup>8</sup> Cambodia's national language.

*the statement I gave to the police. I didn't even understand what was written on that document.*

Sentence lengths were deemed excessive and courts criticised for not taking into account mitigating circumstances (e.g. pleas of guilt), circumstances surrounding the arrest (i.e. problematic ways in which statements were taken from the women) and/or the amount of drugs trafficked. Piti explains her sense of injustice in these terms:

*I think I was unfairly treated by the police because I not understand anything. I did not understand the paper that I signed and I think I was treated unfairly by the court because my sentence is just too long compared to other women here who smuggle many [more] kilos of drugs. They receive only 30 years not a life sentence.*

Ratree articulates why she thinks she was treated unfairly by the criminal justice system as follows:

*I think the police wasn't fair with me because the statement was not accurate, same as the court. They gave me too harsh a sentence. I did not know what happened in the court.*

Ubon expresses, *"I went to the court and I feel they were unfair to me because the court did not do any investigation, they did not ask me anything and then they give me a life sentence"*. Piti says *"the criminal justice system here isn't like one in Thailand. Here, if you confess you get life sentence"*.

Finally, the women thought that only those with money could access justice in Cambodia. Kwanjai states, *"I think it was an unfair justice system. You need to have money. If you don't have money, you can be found guilty even when you are innocent"*. Ubon tried to appeal her sentence but explains:

*I appeal and my case it went to the high court but without money nothing can be changed. I was asked for money if I want my sentence to be reduced but I tell them I don't have any money.*

The following section discusses the pathways that emerged from the analysis of the women's stories.

#### 4.7.2. The criminogenic pathway

The narratives of three women namely, Malee, Samorn and Kwanjai, fit the criminogenic pathway into prison. Each narrated life histories characterised by multiple vulnerabilities likely to set someone on a path to crime i.e. criminogenic. These include: limited education and employment prospects, disrupted familial and other interpersonal relationships, parental and peer group deviance, victimisation, running away from home, deviant behaviour (e.g. partying, gambling, drinking alcohol, using drugs), and employment (e.g. working at night in establishments where sex is sold), low level offending (e.g. taking and dealing drugs), mental ill health including addiction. The narrations of the women's lives took a similar sequential path. Childhood familial instability (often characterised by abuse) led to school dropout, deviant peer group associations, deviant behaviour, running away from home, working 'at night' in establishments where sexual services are sold, unstable adulthood relationships (often marred by domestic violence) resulting in children for which fathers took no responsibility and one final intimate entanglement that leads, in one way or another, to drug trafficking.

Malee left school in grade 6 because her abusive grandmother would not allow her to go. Her childhood was marred by multiple relational vulnerabilities including various forms of abuse, neglect, dislocation from parents, parental alcoholism and the death of her father. Both of her parents drank and when this occurred there was often violence between them, as she indicates: *"both of them drink every week. One time my mother fell on broken glass because she was fighting with my father. They both fought each other"*. Her mother's violent tendencies extended to Malee: *"mum hit me sometimes with a clothes hanger. I sometimes think mum hit me because she had an argument with dad and took it out on me"*. Possibly due to her mother's abuse, Malee felt closer to her father than her mother, but when she was seven years old her father died and the family was left economically destitute. Her mother needed to find work to support the children so Malee went to live with her grandparents in another province. Initially her mother kept in contact via letters but after three years Malee completely lost contact with her mother.

Malee's grandmother was physically abusive. She described her grandmother as *"an angry person who got mad"* for *"no reasonable reason"*. Malee did well at school earning scholarships every year but in grade 6 her grandmother told Malee that the scholarship money was not enough and that Malee *"needed to quit"*. When she was 10 years old Malee's grandfather began sexually abusing her which infuriated her grandmother: *"when grandma saw I think it got her jealous because grandma started to hit me more frequently"*. Eventually Malee *"couldn't take it anymore"*. She runs away from home, spends more time with her friends, tries drugs, gambles and goes *"out partying"*. In time Malee starts 'working at night, as a waitress in a bar where sexual services are provided. She develops an alcohol addiction because she must *"drink with the customers"*. She experiences mental health problems and attempts suicide.

Samorn's dislocation from her parents associated anger at her mother and, subsequent attachment to her deviant peer group result in her leaving school early. Samorn lived with her grandparents until she was nine years old. Her father worked overseas and her mother *"can't take care of all the children so I had to live with my grandma. I was closer to my grandma more than my parents because she raised me when I was little"*. Samorn's father eventually returns and the family is reunited but he drank alcohol *"almost every day"* and her mother was addicted to gambling. Samorn starts *"hanging out"* and *"acting out"* with a deviant peer group, she says: *"I became attached to my friends and skipped school a lot. I tried smoking with my friends for the first-time in grade 8"*. She eventually stops studying as a form of rebellious protest: *"I didn't continue studying because when my brother does something wrong mum always takes his side, so I feel upset and think that I can be independent and don't need to rely on others"*. Malee runs away from home, eventually finds a job as waitress in a bar that provides sexual services, continues to associate with a deviant peer group, uses and deals drugs.

Kwanjai's parents *"had a fight very often"* and her mother *"ran away many times"* and left her alone *"with dad"*. When her mother

left she “felt sad because I had to live with my dad and he did not have much time for me. He went to work and just put a house key around my neck and I was left at home”. Other times her mother left her with a neighbour who as Kwanjai explained: “did not treat me well. She hit me”. Her parents eventually separate and Kwanjai is left in the care of her verbally and emotionally abusive grandmother. She describes: “she doesn't love me she always yell at me. I feel sad. I feel upset. It is like being alone. I felt lonely in that house with my grandmother”. Kwanjai sees her father on a weekly basis but only has contact with her mother “once in a while” because her mother “got a new boyfriend”. Disruption in her childhood familial relationships eventually leads to Kwanjai becoming attached to her “bad friends” and dropping out of school in grade 6. Explaining her decision to try drugs and her deviant behaviour she says: *[I used drugs] because my friends use it and I wasn't happy at home. I drink. I gamble. I party and sometime I run away from home*”.

As adults these women all had children but experienced troubled intimate relationships typified by at least one of the following: domestic violence, spousal substance abuse, and/or infidelity. None of the children's fathers financially provided for their children leaving these women, with limited education and viable employment options, solely responsible for familial economic provisioning/caring responsibilities.

Malee had a series of toxic relationships with men. At 18 years old she was involved in a relationship where infidelity was present on both sides, they separated and she tried to end her own life: “I felt really sad and tried to kill myself by taking 20 sleeping pills”. Her next boyfriend “used drugs”, “bought a girl home”, went to prison for drugs and was violent toward her so she left him. She then had a child “with a guy I did not have a relationship with” and “he didn't support raising the child”. Her next boyfriend was a “very jealous person and later got arrested by the police for drug use” so she “broke up with him”. Her final romantic liaison prior to being incarcerated was with a man who “had an affair”. In response to his infidelity she decided to run away with friend to Brazil to “make him regret what he had done”. Before returning to Thailand one of Malee's friends asks her to bring back a suitcase, she is unaware that it contains drugs.

Kwanjai's first boyfriend, and father of her two children, was addicted to drugs and domestically violent: “usually he is a good man. He love his family but he just got bad because of drugs. I feel scared of him”. When she was pregnant with their second child she threatened to leave him if he continued abusing drugs and her, “but not long after that he start using drugs again so I broke up with him”. Kwanjai started working part-time as a clerk but “the money was not enough” because she had to support her two children, her mother and grandmother. She makes the decision to “start working at night because I need the money to care for my two children, my ex-boyfriend did not send me any money to support the children because he was on drugs heavily”. Kwanjai leaves her children with her mother and grandmother and works as a cashier at a bar where sexual services are provided. She starts going out with friends who work in the bar and meets a “Nigerian boyfriend” who was “very open with me about his drug dealing”.

Her new Nigerian boyfriend introduces Kwanjai to a Thai woman who offers her money to deliver a package. Knowing that what she was being asked to do was illegal but not knowing it involved drugs, she flies to another country to get the package. Once there she meets a “new boyfriend” and discovers she is being asked to deliver drugs. Her new boyfriend gives her the choice of trafficking drugs or staying with him. Kwanjai wants to go home and receive the money promised to her. Kwanjai tells us that her pathway to prison “start [when I am] working at night. Women that work at night are the vulnerable women. I want to tell them stay away from Black men”.

Like Malee and Kwanjai, Samorn also “work at night”, as a waitress in a bar that offered sexual services but unlike the other two women, Samorn's relationships with men were not marred by violence and drug abuse. She was nevertheless relationally abandoned, left alone with two children to support and limited means to achieve this. After running away from her family home, Samorn meets and marries a “foreign man”. They have two children together but “he had a girlfriend in his country and he goes home to marry her”. Feeling heartbroken Samorn “tried to get rid of her second baby. I take pills and alcohol to get of the baby but wasn't successful”. She sells everything she owns to pay for an abortion but is unable to go through with it. Financially destitute Samorn: “decide to go to my mum's house with my two babies because I don't know what to do with my life. I have no choice”. She leaves her children with their grandmother, moves and starts working in one of Thailand's tourist areas. It is here that Samorn meets her second partner, a Nigerian man, and this relationship leads Samorn on a direct path to prison. She would not provide details of the actual offence because it upset her too much, but suggested that her new boyfriend somehow tricked her into trafficking drugs. Let down by her family as a child, and intimate partners as an adult, Samorn's relational vulnerabilities led her on a pathway to prison. With a lack of education her employment prospects were limited and her new boyfriend offered her affluence. She explains: “He told me he can support me and because of that word I decided to move in with him. I don't do anything. He gives me money. I send money home. This guy always has money and credit cards. I've never seen 100,000 THB (approximately 3200 USD) but I did when I was with him.” Samorn blames her individual vulnerabilities for being in prison, but these are interconnected with relational vulnerabilities and the desire for financial stability.

#### 4.7.3. The romantic susceptibility pathway

The stories of four women, Kamon, Ratee, Siriporn and Kulap, were categorised under the romantic susceptibility pathway. While narrating unstable childhoods and adulthood relationships, their experiences were less acute than those on the criminogenic pathway. Further, none had deviant peer group associations, had engaged in deviant or criminal behaviour, run away from home or worked ‘at night’ in establishments where sex was sold, used drugs and/or alcohol. The lives of these women took a similar sequential path. Unstable childhoods including financial difficulties led to limited education, low paying employment and subsequent problems meeting expenses as adults (including familial economic provisioning). All the women then made decisions to leave their home provinces and support networks to find better paying employment before being romanced and groomed as drug couriers by foreign men who exploited their individual vulnerabilities (i.e. loneliness and need to be loved) and economic insecurity.

During childhood, all of the women experienced dislocation from their parents or parental separation. While some had lived with domestic violence and one had an alcoholic father none experienced prolonged directed child abuse as per women on the criminogenic pathway. Furthermore none were victims of domestic violence during adulthood or had previously partnered with deviant

men.

These women did grow up with financial insecurity and exited education because of financial stress. Siriporn explains why she had to leave school prematurely and find work to help support her family:

*When I finished grade 9 I had to leave school to work because my Dad becomes paralyzed. Dad worked in construction and fell off the stairs. That incident has a financial impact on my family and my education. After I left school I went to work in a factory, I work there three to four months and quit because I didn't make enough money. Then I moved to work in a restaurant in Bangkok. I make 2,700 THB a month (approximately 85 USD). It was enough to send some to mum.*

Kulap's parents worked in the rice fields and at times they did not earn enough to support the family. Kulap did not complete high school. She explains:

*I liked going to school but we not have enough money, so I let my sister go to school. She went to technical school. She really focussed on study, so I thought I should give her the opportunity to study. That is why I left school.*

Ratree similarly made the decision to leave school prematurely due to familial financial stress. Her parents:

*Work as general labour and collect rubbish to sell but the money is not enough. I finish school in grade 8, I didn't continue to grade 9, and I decide not to go to school because my family did not have the money.*

Failure to finish high school led to reduced employment prospects during adulthood (social vulnerability). One woman, Siriporn, did return to study as an adult, started a degree and consequently had a relatively well paying job (10,000 THB per month, approximately 313 USD). However, attending university cost a significant amount of money (i.e. fees and other expenses) and both she and her mother took out bank loans to cover the costs. This left Siriporn with substantial debt repayments.

For Kamon leaving school in grade 9 due to financial stress had impacts beyond just decreasing economic prospects in adulthood, it also exacerbated problems with her self-esteem (individual level vulnerability):

*I finish school in Grade 9. I had to leave because my auntie did not have the money to pay. I am sad when I leave school. When the school bus went past I ran away and hide [because this made her sad]. I am very sad. I love school so much. I am chubby and not good looks. I didn't know how to make friends and leaving school early did not help me. I had friends at school but after I left I did not see them anymore because I am shy.*

As already mention, as adults none of these women were victims of domestic violence although Ratree and Kulap were negatively impacted as a result of their husbands' infidelity. No one partnered with a deviant or criminal man (i.e. addicted to drugs, involved in criminal activity) and in comparison with those on the criminogenic pathway, their overall narrations of adult intimacy were far less distressing. Intimate relationships ended because they were simply not 'working out'.

Three of the women had children and after separation from the children's fathers two assumed sole financial responsibility for them. Kulap states, with reference to her second partner:

*He [father of her children] said he would continue to support the baby [post-separation] but he didn't. I don't care. I can look after myself and my baby. I work as a waitress for a long time and send money home to support my children and both with my parents. My children call my parents mum and dad. They are happy with them.*

Siriporn similarly explains: "after we broke up he [father of her children] never supports us, and I don't keep in contact with him". Ratree left her baby in the care of his father, went away to work and regularly sent money to support her child.

For Kulap economic provisioning/caring responsibilities for her children and parents propelled her into a romantic entanglement with a foreign man who then led her down the path to prison. Kulap's life was difficult. She experienced several significant life tragedies and pressures created by sole responsibility for her two children and elderly parents. While the other three women had some support from their families, Kulap was her family's support. The year that she got arrested her first child "got disabled" because "he was climbing a tree next to my mother's house. He fell and he could not move anymore . He can't talk. He is eight years old at the time". Then her second child "was hit by a car and broke some bones". Her father "has something wrong with his blood and they have to cut his leg off below the knee". Kulap's life circumstances combined with a high degree of family responsibility led her to find a foreign boyfriend in the hope that he would provide financial support, she states: "that year, a lot happen. I need a lot of money and I didn't have another way because I am the only person supporting them. So I get a foreign boyfriend".

Kulap's foreign boyfriend took "good care" of her and asked her to travel overseas with him: "he said he had work in Africa. I go with him. He buy me a ticket and he pay for everything". When the time comes to return home, her boyfriend tells Kulap that he still has business to attend to. He suggests she goes ahead and meets him in Cambodia where they can have a few days holiday. After buying her a new suitcase, he sends Kulap on her way. She continues:

*There was no indication that anything was about to go wrong. It was just a normal holiday. The bag looked empty when I filled it with my clothes. It still had the price tag on it, but the drugs were under the lining. They [customs officers in Cambodia] had to use a knife to find it.*

Siriporn, Kamon and Ratree were also romanced by foreign men. All three women were looking for love and romance to fill their voids of loneliness, boredom, low self-confidence or self-worth (individual level vulnerability). Similar to Kulap, these foreign men took "good care" of them up until the point that they were deceived into trafficking drugs. All three women were also struggling financially. These men presented as their emotional and financial rescuers and they described them in similar ways. They were all Nigerian, actively pursued and romanced them, offered the possibility of travel and a future free of financial hardship. Kamon

explains: *he said he will take care of me and my family. [He said] that he will take me places. During that time that I know him he is very supportive of me*". Similarly, Ratreer says: *"he helped me with my expenses. He took me out shopping. He paid for my food. I feel like he actually cares about me. He take good care of me"* and Siriporn states: *"he takes good care of me. I can feel that he cares about me and asks about my family. I thought he was a good man, and started to fall for him."*

Siriporn, Kamon and Ratreer all met their Nigerian boyfriends on-line when they were feeling isolated and lonely. Ratreer for example stated: *"when I was in [the city studying and working to provide for her child] I don't have any friends. I always stay by myself, and social media make me feel like I have friends. I was lonely"*. Likewise Kamon, who suffered with low self-esteem, went on line because *"I am chubby. No one talk to a fat woman. The on-line dating make me feel comfortable because I have people to talk to"*.

#### 4.7.4. Domestic violence pathway

The stories of two women, Ubon and Anong, were categorised under the pathway of domestic violence. Ubon was incarcerated as a direct result of being in a violent relationship. Here threats, coercion and intimidation propelled her into prison. The relationship between Anong's victimisation and offending was palpable in that she resorted to drug trafficking after decades of domestic violence victimisation and associated debt finally overwhelmed her. Both women experienced unstable childhoods, were undereducated and struggled financially as adults. However, it was their abusive intimate relationships in adulthood that drove them into prison for cross-border international drug trafficking.

Anong grew up under strained financial circumstances but described her childhood as warm and loving. Childhood poverty meant that Anong never attended school but worked in the rice fields to help support her family. Her financial vulnerabilities led her into an early marriage to a man she did not love, as she explains: *"this man like me. I was in debt [to his family]. He wanted to marry me [and] I didn't have a way to pay his family back so I married him"*. What followed was over two decades of domestic violence victimisation. Eventually she had enough and committed the offence because she *"wanted to escape"* her *"life and all the problems"*. While she worked hard to support her family, providing for them was difficult and paying for her children's school expenses was especially challenging. Lack of education limited Anong's economic prospects and her husband exacerbated the family's financial stress through his alcoholism and financial abuse. She started drinking alcohol as a form of self-medication. She stated:

*I had no one, no one to talk to. I did not like this man. I did not like his violent behaviour. I want to escape my life and all the problems that I have. I am fed up with everything in my life. All the problems in my life building up, that was the turning point for me.*

The connection between Ubon's domestic violence victimisation and imprisonment was evidential in that fear of her intimate partner pushed her down the path to prison. Ubon was intellectually disabled and this individual level vulnerability restricted her ability to be economically self-sufficient. Talking about her days at school Ubon says:

*I went to school but only attend two normal classes. My mum tell me I am not like normal kids. She told her friends that I am a slow learner. I have some friends but people call my friends retarded. Some of them handicapped but they are not stupid. They just have problems with their bodies and their brains.*

Ubon was adopted by an affluent western couple and raised outside of Thailand. Her childhood was unstable. Ubon's father died when she was young and her narrative suggests her parents struggled raising their intellectually disabled child:

*My mum love me she just don't know what she can do to help me. She always complain that I make mistakes all the time. Sometimes she make me feel like I am useless. Sometimes my Dad lock me in the bathroom and turn out the light. I don't like the darkness so I scream. I remember one time there was blood coming out of my nose and when I was five or six my dad hit me with a belt, it was a small thing [that she did], something that my father don't like a girl to do.*

Ultimately the struggle of parenting Ubon appears to have over-whelmed her mother who manipulates Ubon into returning to Thailand where she promptly abandons her daughter in a convent. Ubon says:

*When I was 17 my Mum thought that I could get better if I get to visit Thailand because she knows that I miss Thailand. When she told me that she was going to take me to Thailand I was very happy but I didn't know she was going to leave me there.*

Looking for love and wanting to prove to her mother that she can look after herself, Ubon's vulnerabilities are exploited by a Nigerian man she meets on-line. He is abusive, violent and uses trickery, threats and intimidation to convince her marry him and to traffic drugs:

*He cause me to do this and that. I want to get out of the relationship but I didn't know what to do. He threaten to kick me out of the house and take all my things. He hit me sometimes but only when I disappointed him. He would not do so much physical abuse because he didn't want anyone to know that I was in an abusive relationship, and you know, men can be abusive in many different ways, but this one he was abusive. He do bad things to my heart and sometime my body. He would say I am a useless person. Sometime he say get out, or sometime he threaten to leave me, or let me walk on the street, or not giving me my money, and if I don't have money I cannot walk to the church [convent], it is far. I was scared of him but at the same time I hated him and I feel angry. He always say you have an innocent face no one would think that you would carry drugs, why don't you want to do it, and that would make me feel weak and vulnerable. One time he sent me to Africa but I did not bring anything back. That make him angry. He threaten to kill me. I remember he hurt my hand by banging his hand on my hand. He is a big guy. I cried because it hurt so much. He ordered me to go to Cambodia.*

#### 4.7.5. The self-indulgent pathway

The story of only one woman was categorised under this pathway of the self-indulgent woman. Piti differed from the other women in that she presented with minimal vulnerabilities and did not narrate being duped, intimidated, threatened or driven to trafficking drugs by a romantic partner. Rather her pathway to prison was motivated by self-indulgence or more specifically, money and a desire to travel.

Piti described her childhood home in positive terms. She grew up with her parents in a middle-income household, and “*they have enough money*”. Her parent’s relationship was “*good*” and she “*has a close relationship with mum and dad*”. Piti had a “*few friends at school, most of them were good kids*” who did not “*use drugs or alcohol*”.

During adulthood Piti met a man who she later married because “*he is rich and has money and I also love him*”. Piti described their relationship as “*good*” but ended when they grew apart. Post-separation she received significant financial assistance from her ex-husband’s family. However, Piti wanted to earn more money and to “*try something new*”. She started working as a sex worker earning 30,000 to 40,000 THB per month (approximately 939-1251 USD) and also “*look for a foreign boyfriend to earn money*”. Piti finds a “*foreign boyfriend*” they are married and have children together. Her husband treated her “*very well*” paying for everything and she “*thinks he is a good man*”.

When Piti’s husband goes overseas to visit family one of his Nigerian friends asked her if she would like to deliver a package for him. She describes: “*he promise me 3000 USD, bought me a ticket to Brazil, and give me 1500 USD pocket money. He didn't tell me about what the package was but I kind of know what it was*”. Piti travelled to Brazil, did not inform her husband of her whereabouts and knowingly trafficked drugs into Cambodia. She told us:

*I know what these Black men do in Thailand. I know that some women might be tricked [but] for me I just want to travel and didn't think of the consequences. I was not tricked and I understood what I was doing.*

## 5. Summary and conclusion

In this article a feminist pathways perspective and life history interviews were used to map the stories of Thai women imprisoned in Cambodia for cross-border international drug trafficking. The general profiles of these women revealed life histories marred by individual (e.g. mental ill health), relational (e.g. parental abuse and domestic violence), social vulnerabilities (e.g. low levels of education and subsequent limited employment opportunities) and problematic criminal justice system practices (Nuytiens and Christaens, 2016: 25). These findings were further illuminated in the women’s stories and closely correspond with the extant research on women’s involvement in the international drug trade.

All of the women can be defined as drug couriers who were carrying drugs across international borders for somebody else. None were career criminals (i.e. habitual/repeat offenders), had knowledge of the international drug trade or relationships with established criminal organisations. Their offending was characterised by a lack of control (e.g. some were unaware that they were carrying drugs) and involved varying degrees of exploitation. Pre-arrest, their only contact with the international drug trade was via an intermediary (nearly always a man and most frequently a romantic partner) who supplied them with the drugs (either with or without their consent) and instructions around what they needed to do. Most were prima facie drug trafficking targets because they presented with varying degrees of vulnerability. Some could be construed as human trafficking victims because they were moved from one nation to another under circumstances of force, threat, coercion and/or deception (Diaz-Cotto, 2005; Sudbury, 2005; Fleetwood, 2014).

However, not everyone can be considered a victim compelled by others into crime. Consider Piti who expressed her choice to traffic drugs for money and the opportunity to travel. In addition, women still expressed agency even within the confines of their gendered social realities making them both victim and agent (Fleetwood, 2014: 160–164). For example, after enduring years of domestic violence, Among chose to traffic drugs because she wanted to escape her “*life and all the problems*”. Further, for many, imprisonment for drug trafficking occurred against a backdrop of economic familial provisioning. Some women, for example, actively sought out romantic relationships with foreign men for the money. Later many of these men then used the women (to varying degrees) to traffic drugs. Others, made the choice to ‘do something illegal’ without being fully aware of what they were doing because they wanted the money and/or lived a deviant lifestyle.

Additionally, four distinct pathways to prison were identified – the criminogenic pathway, the romantic susceptibility pathway, the domestic violence pathway, the self-indulgent pathway. Results parallel those found in the western feminist pathways literature. For example, the self-indulgent and domestic violence pathways correspond with Daly’s battered women and other (economic) pathways. The criminogenic pathway is a fusion of Daly’s (1994) harmed and harming women/street women categories. Those on the criminogenic pathway were harmed, damaged (emotionally/psychologically) and had at certain point run away from home. However, they did not harm others, and while they engaged in low level deviant and/or criminal behaviour, they did not have drug addictions or prior contact with the criminal justice system. The romantic susceptibility pathway also loosely corresponds with Daly’s (1994) drug connected women. These women committed drug offences due to their intimate entanglements. However, none of the women on this pathway had ever engaged in prior criminality and all were seemingly tricked into offending, being targeted and romanced by men with plausible exploitative intent.

The research findings are further consistent with pathways studies outside of the west in that victimisation, relationships with men, economic marginalisation, familial economic provisioning, caretaking and responsibility are evidenced in the women’s trajectories into prison. Findings showed an “inter-relatedness of a range of factors and events that created a context that limited and shaped women’s choices” propelling them down a pathway to prison (Artz et al., 2012). Within these contexts women’s agency was restricted and their choices constrained. Finally (and in contrast to western jurisdictions) women’s pathways into prison were

negatively impacted by an inability to access justice i.e. they were faced with comparatively unjust and/or corrupted criminal justice processes and inadequate legal representation.

Like many nations Cambodia has enthusiastically embraced the global war on drugs. Sentencing regimes are harsh and individualised penalties non-existent. For the women who shared their stories, this meant no obvious consideration of the circumstances leading to their arrest. Harsh penalties were applied regardless of culpability and mitigating circumstances and/or the collateral damage caused to the women and their families. This is especially concerning when it comes to foreign national women who are a particularly vulnerable group within prison populations.

The United Nations has recently called for more research on the offences committed by women and the reasons triggering women's confrontations with the criminal justice system. They ask that this research be published and disseminated to allow the development of policies that 'aim to improve the outcomes and fairness to women' (United Nations, 2010). Further, resolution 52/1 of the Commission of Narcotic Drugs at the United Nations urges international cooperation in addressing the involvement of women in drug trafficking, especially as couriers, an important aim of which is gender analysis of the international drug trade (Fleetwood and Haas, 2011). Given the relative absence of research examining the possible gendered circumstances leading to imprisonment in South East Asia, and limited prior research on women's cross-border drug trafficking in the region, this study is important. It is nevertheless limited in that the focus is one group of women (i.e. Thai foreign nationals), imprisoned for a specific crime within one country's prison system. It is thus crucial that future research be undertaken in the region to explore women's pathways to prison for both drug trafficking and other crimes.

### Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

### Conflicts of interest

Both authors would like to declare that they have no conflict of interest.

### Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the Thailand Institute of Justice, the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Griffith University and the Griffith Criminology Institute for supporting this research. We are also extremely grateful to the women who so kindly gave us their time and shared their stories.

### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijlcr.2018.12.001>.

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