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Codependency in a Relationship with a Repeat Offender

Współuzależnienie w relacji z recydywistą

ABSTRACT

Codependency, understood as a dysfunctional and learned pattern of coping with stress, occurs in a variety of relationships, including in women living with repeat offenders. This particular context of codependency is poorly explored by researchers.

The purpose of this study was to determine what features described as characteristic of codependency in a relationship with an alcoholic occur in women's relationships with repeat offenders. The material for the study consisted of discussions in online forums in which women described their experiences of living with repeat offenders. The discussions were examined using the content analysis method. It was found that partners of repeat offenders followed behavioral scripts typical of women living with alcoholics. In particular, these included trying to stabilize and control the man's criminal activity, giving him unconditional help and support, using psychological defense mechanisms to lift his responsibility for the crime committed, and distorting reality by activating a system of illusions and fantasies. As a result of these behaviors, women created a cycle that was difficult to break, which resulted in negative experiences, such as loss of self-esteem, illness, separation from their social circles, and in some cases, it meant problems with the law for the partner.

KEYWORDS

co-dependence, life partners of criminals, criminals' family environment, recidivism, crime renouncement

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

współuzależnienie, partnerki życiowe przestępców, środowisko rodzinne przestępców, recydywa, odstępianie od przestępczości

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Due to the fact that women's pathological attachment to repeat offenders is a barrier to their partners' withdrawal from criminal activity, it is worth offering repeat offenders serving their sentences appropriate educational programs.

ABSTRAKT

Współzależnienie rozumiane jako dysfunkcyjny i wyuczony wzór radzenia sobie ze stresem występuje w różnych relacjach, w tym u kobiet żyjących z recydywistami. Kontekst tego zjawiska jest słabo rozpoznany przez badaczy.

Celem podjętego badania było ustalenie, jakie własności opisane jako charakterystyczne dla współzależnienia w relacji z alkoholikiem występują w związkach kobiet z recydywistami. Materiał do badania pochodził z dyskusji na forach internetowych, w których uczestniczyły kobiety z doświadczeniem życia z recydywistą. Dyskusje zbadano metodą analizy treści. Ustalono, że partnerki recydywistów stosują skrypty zachowań typowe dla kobiet żyjących z alkoholikami. Były to zwłaszcza: podejmowanie prób stabilizowania i kontrolowania przestępczej aktywności mężczyzny, udzielanie mu bezwarunkowej pomocy i wsparcia, stosowanie psychologicznych mechanizmów obronnych w celu zniesienia jego odpowiedzialności za przestępstwo, zniekształcanie rzeczywistości przez uruchomienie systemu iluzji i fantazji. W następstwie takich zachowań kobiety tworzyły trudny do przerwania cykl, który skutkowało dla nich negatywnymi przeżyciami, m.in. spadkiem poczucia własnej wartości, chorobami, separowaniem się od własnego środowiska społecznego, a na niektóre z nich partner ściągnął problemy z prawem.

Ze względu na fakt, że patologiczne przywiązane kobiety do recydywisty jest barierą w odstąpieniu przez niego od działalności przestępczej, warto zaoferować recydywistom odbywającym wyroki odpowiednie programy edukacyjne.

Theoretical background

The concept of "codependency" appeared in the scientific literature with regard to alcoholism. It is most often defined (a) as a disease (this dimension of the phenomenon was indicated e.g. by Janett Woititz [1979, 1993] and Timmen L. Cermak [1986]), (b) as a personality disorder which may have developed before the relationship with the alcoholic (such approach is presented e.g. by John Bradshaw

[1988], Wanda Sztander [1995] and Pia Mellody [2003]) or (c) as a fixed response to stress resulting from the partner's drinking in the family of procreation, which is a concept approved by most scientists (e.g. by Jerzy Mellibruda and Zofia Sobolewska [1997], Bohdan T. Woronowicz [1998] and Andrzej Margasiński [2011]).

The symptoms of alcoholic codependency can be divided into several groups which are theoretically distinct, but mutually conditioning and arranged in a maladaptive pattern. According to Bohdan T. Woronowicz (1998: 114–115), the most typical symptoms are succumbing to the alcoholic's drinking rhythm, obsessively controlling the alcoholic, helping and excessively caring for him, taking responsibility for him, tolerating his pathological behaviour whilst simultaneously neglecting oneself and one's feelings of guilt, as well as distorting reality by activating defence mechanisms (such as denial, minimising, blaming, rationalising and dreaming-planning [Mellibruda 1997: 290–292]). They help one to avoid the emotional distress from confronting unpleasant facts (Wegscheider-Cruse 1989), but their use, after a longer time, leads to mental (and often somatic) health disorders (Strelau 2000: 618–620).

A person operating according to a maladaptive pattern sacrifices themselves and meets the needs of the alcoholic, thus feeling approved and important whilst preserving the relationship with the addicted partner (Ançel 2012: 71). At the same time, consequences appear. Codependents ignore their own needs, sometimes to the extent that “their world falls into the background and sometimes it can never be restored” (Flis 2022: 23). They become victims of physical and psychological aggression from the alcoholic, often aimed at getting access to alcohol (Węgrzynowicz 2001: 1). There is a change in the structure of feelings in their families: negative emotions begin to dominate—mainly shame (along with social isolation), as well as helplessness, uncertainty, fear, guilt and anger (Sztander 1992).

An opportunity for the codependent person to change an arrangement based on alcoholic codependency is therapy. As Jerzy Mellibruda (2023) states, it involves learning to recognise the patterns that led to the pathological situation, diagnosing personal resources and developing new behavioural scripts and a vision of the future in which life with the partner would be a conditional choice rather than an absolute necessity.

Although codependency is originally and generally associated with alcohol dependence, over time the phenomenon has been described in other contexts. It has been pointed out that it can be present in families with physical and sexual violence (Cierpiałkowska, Ziarko 2010: 213), with permanent stress due to children's behavioural problems, with a person suffering from a chronic illness and even in families in which the adults' jobs are connected with helping others (Altinova, Altuntaş 2015: 86). Recently, the term "codependency" has been used to describe almost any dynamic of dysfunctional relationships in which there is a learnt, maladaptive pattern of coping with stress. Mechanisms characteristic of relationships in families with alcoholism have also been recognised among wives and partners of repeat offenders (Altinova, Altuntaş 2015: 86).

Offenders' families have been of interest to researchers for decades. However, life in such families has most often been studied from the perspective of male offenders. Once the focus shifted to the women involved in relationships with these offenders, the women were usually characterised in terms of the negative consequences of their partner's crime. It was found that society evaluates such women negatively (e.g. as "accomplices" or "not entirely blameless for their partner's crime"), which is why they feel compelled to hide the man's incarceration or even to change their place of residence (Marchel-Kosiorek 2010: 161; Witkowska-Paleń 2012: 81; Kieszkowska 2018: 172–173). It has been established that the material conditions of women in a family with offenders and children tend to deteriorate with the incarceration of the man, beginning with the loss or reduction of family income (Smith et al. 2007: 16–18, 42–47) and leading to limitations in meeting the needs of family members and managing the household (Dzierżyńska-Breś 2020: 203). Another issue involving women's relationships with offenders that has been addressed by researchers is emotional bonding. As a consequence of a family member's imprisonment, this can be weakened or even broken (Machel 2014: 51; Kieszkowska 2018: 171), the tangible evidence of which is divorce. It has been proven that the risk of divorce increases significantly after a man is released from prison (Apel et al. 2010: 286). Knowledge about women who live with men serving sentences is further enhanced by research on custody in these specific, temporarily incomplete families. Researchers point to the higher incidence of

punitive, inconsistent and generally unsupportive behaviour towards children in this type of family, linking it to economic difficulties, increased depression and increased irritability among the mothers (Fidelus 2016: 337). At the same time, the researchers caution that the imprisonment of a family member is unlikely to mark the beginning of problems for the family. Rather, what follows is a continuation or exacerbation of an already difficult situation for the family, often entailing limited education, poverty and problems with substance abuse, mental health, violence, etc. (Kjellstrand, Eddy 2011: 20). Former wives of convicts explain that incarceration was only one of several factors leading to divorce (Fishman 1990: 209).

In spite of the difficulties resulting from their financial situation, raising their children and maintaining relationships with their social environment, some women decide to stay with their incarcerated husband/partner, maintain regular contact with him, support him and even significantly subordinate their personal and professional plans to the schedule of the penitentiary institution (Szczepanik, Miszewski 2016: 70–71). Unfortunately, prisoners sometimes treat the women helping them and sacrificing for them as (drawing on the nomenclature of drama) a “supporting actor” who follows a script written by the man to reinforce his sense of agency and desired social position among his fellow prisoners (Szczepanik 2017: 185–187). Despite this objectification, even when the relationship has become extremely problematic and unsatisfactory, some women persist in it, revealing characteristics and behaviours confusingly reminiscent of those observed in relationships based on codependency with an alcoholic (Szczepanik, Miszewski 2016: 71).

The issue of women who are codependent on criminals was directly addressed by Renata Szczepanik (2015a: 332, 343) in her research on repeat offenders’ desistance from crime. Within the broader category of “rescuers”, she distinguished a subtype of codependent woman. She described her as one who, even if she disapproves of the offence, unconditionally supports her partner in eliminating the discomforts that result from breaking the law. She forgives him and believes his promises. Quite often, driven by a desire to help her partner, she herself breaks the law. For a woman codependent on a repeat offender, it is significant that she explains his pathological behaviour by drawing on the arguments that criminals use when they

still want to perceive themselves as good people despite violating the rules. As Beata M. Nowak (2020: 33–35) writes, these include rationalising the criminal act as a means to gain a greater good, comparing one’s own crimes with others’ more serious acts and blurring and displacing responsibility. Furthermore, a woman who is dependent on a repeat offender does not acquire a rational assessment of the situation, even if she is objectified and becomes a victim of violence. This problem was pointed out by Danuta Raś (2019: 357), who noted that a woman pathologically attached to an offender may be not only a partner to him, but also a mother.

By sacrificing herself for the criminal, the woman gains something. First of all, she preserves her relationship with him. She also improves her image, as she embodies the qualities preferred by the masculinised and patriarchal criminal environment (she is absolutely loyal, submissive, persistent and faithful in her feelings, she unconditionally sacrifices herself for a man and she fulfils a kind of mission whilst waiting for a man to return) (Szczepanik, Miszewski 2016: 72; Łukaszek 2018: 261; Raś 2019: 358). However, by sacrificing herself for the man, the woman simultaneously becomes, as Woronowicz put it in relation to codependency on an alcoholic (2009: 327), “his persecutor” as well as “one of the victims of a pathological relationship that gives a small profit, despite costing a lot.” The woman becomes the man’s persecutor because, by permanently rescuing him, she prevents him from anchoring himself in freedom and provides no basis for him to try to break with his criminal lifestyle (Szczepanik 2015b: 52–53). Also, the woman becomes a victim because she suffers the effects of codependency, namely she experiences negative emotions, gives up the fulfilment of her own needs and experiences violence from the partner (the occurrence of the latter has been empirically confirmed in almost 30% of relationships with offenders [Łukaszek 2018: 262]). As a victim of violence, on the other hand, a woman may be coerced or manipulated into a crime by her partner (this trend was noticed in almost one in five offenders [Łukaszek 2018: 262]). She may also, according to the mechanism identified by Luz A. Ariztizábal (2020: 8), herself turn to crime according to the idea that “I did it for him.” The woman also bears the cost of her dependence on the recidivist because she is affected by the negative consequences of his criminal activity. She experiences them both prior to her partner’s

incarceration (e.g. the nuisance of interventions by the authorities or the family's lower social status [Ostrihanska 1976: 35]) and after incarceration (e.g. the economic weakening of the family caused by the loss of the incarcerated person's income, the expenses incurred in connection with his imprisonment, his reduced work opportunities after release due to employment barriers for former prisoners and the placement of both the man and woman in the discredited category of underprivileged families [Weaver, Nolan 2015: 3]).

Methodological basis for the research

The author sought to answer the following questions: (1) What codependency-specific behaviours do female partners of repeat offenders exhibit? (2) What were the costs of their involvement in a relationship with a repeat offender?

It was assumed that the method of qualitative content analysis, with an inductive (*in vivo*) approach, would be adequate to clarify the issue (Gibbs 2007: 93), as it offers the possibility of exploring categories which the researcher had not anticipated (Glińska-Noweś, Escher 2018: 75). The research was conducted according to the procedure described by Karolina Szczepaniak (2012: 100), i.e. it started with the selection of the research material, which was to come from discussions in online forums. Appropriate forums were selected by searching in a browser for phrases containing the keywords “women living with criminals”, “relationship with a convict”, “women waiting for a convict”, etc., each time completing the phrase with the word “forum”. A total of four forums, and strictly the existing threads on them, were qualified for analysis: (1) discussions on “the sole family provider in prison” and “relationship with a convict” on [forumprawne.org](#); (2) “my husband is in prison and I can't take it anymore...”, “relationship with a criminal?”, “whose husband or partner is in prison???”¹ and “missing a boyfriend who is in prison” on the forum [netkobiety.pl](#); (3) “has anyone been with a guy who was in prison?” on [kafeteria.pl](#); and (4) “boyfriend in prison” and “boyfriend with a past” on [wizaz.pl](#). The selected discussions took place between 2012 and 2023; some of them lasted several years each. The shortest consisted of more than

1 Original text of the discussion topics.

50 posts, whilst the longest had more than 400. The women who participated in them shared their experiences of living with a repeat offender, although this was not always a recidivist in the legal sense or in the sense of penitentiary recidivism.²

The next stage was to read the discussions several times in order to create a categorisation key. Categories emerged as the reading went on, with the discovery of certain recurring themes and their interconnectedness. These themes were “behaviours typical of codependency” and “the costs to a woman for continuing in an addiction-based relationship with a repeat offender”. These categories were labelled and then illustrated with excerpts from the statements of women involved in the discussions. Although the discussions were public, measures were taken to make it difficult to identify their location and authors online. Namely, the statements were slightly edited (to make them linguistically correct) and, adopting Robert Kozinets’ view that pseudonyms function online like real names and should be treated as such (2010), the login names of their authors were omitted.

Behaviours of women in relationships with repeat offenders

Based on the analysis of the discussions, it was found that women in relationships with repeat offenders displayed a number of behaviours typical of alcoholic codependency. These behaviours were labelled and are exemplified with appropriate quotes.

The women tried to stabilise and control their partner’s behaviour. They assumed that if they were ready to help the

2 Legal recidivism is a situation in which an offender convicted of an intentional crime, after spending at least 6 months in prison, commits an intentional crime within 5 years that is similar to the one for which they were imprisoned (Art. 64 §1 of the Penal Code Act of 6 June 1997). Some of the participants were in a relationship with a man who committed multiple, but different crimes, which did not meet the criteria of legal recidivism despite being qualified as criminological recidivism. In turn, penitentiary recidivism occurs when a person is imprisoned for at least the second time. Among the women whose statements were analysed, there were some whose partner was imprisoned for the first time, although he had already engaged in criminal activity for which he had received a suspended prison sentence. This type of situation is not considered penitentiary recidivism, although it does fall within the category of criminological recidivism.

man give up criminal activity, then he would certainly make an effort to change. They declared that if he failed to do so, they would present him with an ultimatum (e.g. they would abandon him), which they believed would be a shock and would result in him taking the right path.

I fell in love with a guy who has a bad past. At the age of 15–17, he had several court trials for beatings. He didn't finish junior high school; he goes out fighting for his sports club; he drinks, he smokes, not to mention snorting coke (he does it once in a while) [...]. I want to help him change his life [...]. I think once he has a decent girlfriend, he MAY come to his senses and get on with his life. I'm not saying that he will immediately stop drinking, getting high, fighting or stealing. If I see that he hasn't changed, I'll just leave him and maybe then he'll realise his mistake.

The women adjusted to the rhythm of life determined by the partner's criminal activity. They calculated the risk of him being imprisoned into their life together, but hoped that if it happened it would be in the distant future. After an arrest or a sentence of absolute imprisonment, the women argued that the incarceration happened at the worst possible time, because it coincided with, for example, their pregnancy, the birth of their child or when it seemed that the man had "turned the corner".

Four weeks ago my boyfriend went away and, as always, he was supposed to come back after a week, but his phone being switched off indicated one thing. I was aware that sooner or later it was going to end like this (he's been dealing with this for 16 years and has never been caught), but I didn't know that it would happen at such an important time. I am seven months pregnant and I was left alone, without any support.

The women functioned according to a peculiar rhythm, even after the incarceration of their partner. In such a case, it was a rhythm measured by successive, limited visits—especially in the form of visits to the prison.

I only live my life from visit to visit, and it's awful. However, I love him more than life and I am able to sacrifice so much for him. Sometimes I go to him, to the prison, and wait three hours so that I can only see him for an hour, but that hour is priceless. And that's how it works. From phone call to phone call, from visit to visit, from letter to letter.... It's hard at the beginning, but once you "learn" this rhythm, you can sort yourself out and it's not so bad.

It was typical of the women dependent on a partner/criminal to give him multifaceted support. They helped them by sending money and parcels. They were emotionally supportive, making phone calls and visiting their partner in prison; they intervened in courts, trying to shorten the sentence or obtain a reprieve or break in the sentence; they collected arguments in appeal cases, etc. Some of those interventions were based on a naive assumption that it is enough to appeal to the court's empathy to improve their partner's situation.

Today during the day my fiancé was sent to prison for old issues. They told me they would lock him up for two years. I'm heartbroken because it all happened in a second. I'm seven weeks pregnant with a threatened pregnancy, I live alone, I have no income because I can't work physically because of the risk of losing my baby. He was my only support. Do you think it's possible that a letter to the prosecutor's office about my endangered pregnancy and loss of the sole breadwinner would change anything?

It was typical that the women engaged in support activities and cared for their partners whilst ignoring their own needs. Some of them tried to argue that the man deserved special attention due to the nature of the penitentiary environment.

For them, there, behind bars, it's important to know that someone is waiting for them; that they aren't alone. And, above all, it's better not to show them that we are not coping, that we also need support, because then it will be harder for them, too. They have a lot of time to think and it's easy to break down there. And if they know that everything is ok here and they don't have to worry about anything, then it's certainly much easier for them.

Women were often the sole source of help and support. They supported their partners continuously, unconditionally, despite the financial and emotional cost and despite sometimes being exhausted by rescuing the men. They did not stop helping and supporting, even when they realised it was self-destructive and even though circumstances arose that made it easier to stop (e.g. the imposition of a long prison sentence).

Also, my problem is that I still don't know how to cut myself off and stop supporting him. I feel that even though he's not here, he still rules me. I'm still afraid of what he'll say, how he'll react, so I prefer to do everything as before.

The women who participated in the discussions tried, through various kinds of defence mechanisms, to eliminate or reduce their partner's responsibility for the crime and/or to minimise the meaning of the crime itself. By proving that their partner was one of many offenders, but that those others had escaped justice or were treated extremely leniently, the women used the mechanism of diluting responsibility. Some put the blame on themselves, explaining that their own behaviour was the stimulus for the criminal act. Still others, blurring the man's responsibility for the crime, blamed institutions which, although statutorily obliged to help and support citizens, in these women's view had failed and even encouraged the man to commit crime.

I also have a husband in prison [...]. We got married and it was ok until we started to run out of money. We rented a beautiful flat, but we couldn't afford it on one salary. When we went to the institution, those [****] told him to go to a homeless shelter and me to a home for single mothers since we couldn't afford to pay the rent. "Support" from the state? Thank you very much. They prefer to support the homeless instead of helping families. And he started stealing. Eventually he got caught. My husband went looking for work wherever he could, asking for any kind of job, and no-one gave it to him, no-one helped [...]. His probation officer is a failure. He gave him addresses where he could find a job. My husband would go there, but it always turned out there was no such establishment or they didn't need an employee.

There was also evidence of attempts to rationalise the criminal act as a means of obtaining a greater or basic good for survival.

The latter received a six-month sentence for stealing metal parts from a mine worth PLN 320. He did this because he could no longer feed his children. I know it was wrong, but he had no choice, and one would do anything for one's children.

Some women used the mechanism of minimising the significance of the crime by comparing it with others' more serious acts, and even through such comparisons they made a kind of gradation of offenders.

Criminals aren't that bad. Some of them are bad, but there are normal people, too, because not everyone is in prison for the same things, and not everyone has a messed up head like, say, rapists or murderers.

The women justified their own involvement in a relationship with a criminal by activating illusions and fantasies. In the illusions, they referred to the value of love. They argued that true love sometimes requires trials, in view of which they saw their partner's imprisonment as a test of the permanence of the relationship and a chance to take it to a higher level.

I have to admit that it was hard at the beginning. I remember walking him outside the prison. It was the worst day of my life. A moment, and the gate was closed. I fell to my knees and burst into tears. I walked around for a week like a beaten dog. But now I'm strong [...]. It's a real test of a relationship, to be honest. However, if you survive this, you'll survive anything and it will be a strong relationship.

The women assumed that their partner would appreciate the qualities they had proven to possess, looking forward to his return and showing help and support.

He was given three years. Seven months to go. Will I wait? Yes! Why? [...] Because I know that this is the person who will appreciate my love more than a boy who sits behind a desk in a suit, because he appreciates that I am with him; that I have not left him.

They proved the value of their partner by juxtaposing him with the example of a man who, although he did not break the law, does not possess the qualities valued in the criminal world (e.g. specific type of courage or loyalty to "their own").

Not everyone who has been in prison is bad [...]. For me, such things aren't important, because this is something I can tolerate. Believe me, I am happy with him. Is a criminal worse than others? Not at all! He's better than many youngsters who talk and talk, and, in the end, they either **** off or betray their friends.

Among the illusions used by the woman to justify her relationship with a partner involved in criminal activity was the argument that this activity had slowed down and there were signs of settling down after regaining his freedom.

He currently has several suspended sentences, and he was in prison for theft. That was three years ago. It changed a lot in his life, gave him food for thought, and he's simply changed since then. He also goes to work abroad every now and then. In general, he says that he has changed and that he has completely different values because of what he's been through.

As the women rationalised their being in a relationship of dependency on a partner involved in criminal activity, they recalled the memories of living together. They retold past events, presenting themselves as particularly adored and respected by that man.

Mine loves me like a princess. No man has ever looked at me like this, and no man has fought for me like he has. Never [...]. That's the way he is. Emotional [...]. I have been in a few relationships and I have never felt so loved and important to anyone. I am very important for him. I know it.

Some fantasised about the future with the incarcerated man. They assumed that his mere return to an environment of freedom would guarantee their family happiness.

I know that once this nightmare is over, we'll be the happiest people in the world and we'll finally be able to get our life in order [...]. Otherwise, I wouldn't agree to wait for him for such a long time.

The symptoms described above were accompanied by tolerance for the partner's pathological behaviour; the women allowed their partners to mistreat them and they did not stop the relationship even after experiencing manipulation, intimidation, insults, reproach or physical assault.

He made me neurotic and, on top of that, he spat in my eyes. He didn't hit me, probably because there would have been a mark, so he spit. Yes, I go to appointments, answer phone calls and I have dealt with his unfinished business. I don't know why. I know you'll say I'm stupid. I don't tell anyone how he treats me. Everyone thinks we are a happily married couple.

As a consequence of these co-existing behaviours, the women created a cycle that was difficult to break. Even when they perceived that it was destructive for them to persist in the relationship and favourable circumstances arose for them to free themselves from their partner, they were unable to do so.

My husband is currently in custody, as the sentence has not yet become final, and taking into account his appeal, it will probably still take some time [...]. At the moment I am the only person who is interested in his life. As far as the divorce is concerned, I think about it very often, but somehow, I don't know how to put it into practice. I can't imagine him coming back and us living together again. If I was a **** when he was

home and if I cheated on him, as he suggests, what will happen after he's been away for so long! I really can't cope with that and it's making me terribly tired, which is why I'm not able to function normally. I don't know, maybe I need time, maybe it's too early to see the effects of therapy, or maybe it's like my previous therapist once said: when I'm in therapy, I understand and nod, and when I go home, I forget everything that was talked about in therapy.

Costs for women persisting in a relationship of dependency with a repeat offender

The women, who submitted to the rhythm of life set by their partners' criminal activity and who protected them from its consequences suffered serious costs. Their involvement had financial consequences, which started after the man's arrest (e.g. because they bore the expenses of hiring a lawyer). Some of these women became so involved in helping that they sacrificed all their savings, neglected and sometimes lost their job, thus losing their only source of income.

I spent all my money on a lawyer, and the business stopped prospering. I felt that I was being pulled into a big, black abyss.

Also, the women discussed the health consequences of being in a relationship of dependency with a criminal (such consequences mainly included mental health problems).

I'm not able to continue the relationship in the way I have done so far. Now, after some time, I know this. It has a negative influence on my wellbeing, I'm starting to get depressed, I'm taking tranquillisers.

Some of the women realised that, by helping their partner and supporting him, they got involved in their own problems with the law.

A cheat, a liar, a traitor, who—as it turned out—stole from his own family, and who got me into trouble with the law. This is how he repaid me for my help, sacrifice and financial support.

However, most of the comments referring to the cost of helping the partner/criminal were concerned with the emotional aspect. The women, although they helped and supported their partners, believed

their partner's accusations that they were not involved enough, and consequently struggled with feelings of guilt.

The worst thing is that we have been arguing more and more lately.... He accuses me of being unsupportive and, although not entirely, partially he is right. I feel that I am not supporting him as much as I should. I mean emotional support, because I help him financially if I can afford to do so. He often says that instead of helping him get through this time, I make it harder for him with the constant arguments on the phone.

Among the women living with a man involved in criminal activity, some noticed their partner's unjustified demands and the lack of positive change in his behaviour. Consequently, they felt ambivalent about continuing to help him. The conflicting desires, however, were incompilant with the image of a woman being faithful and sacrificing for her man. The women felt uncomfortable experiencing such desires, and this was a reason for them to doubt their own worth.

This great interest he has in himself, the lack of any remorse or conclusions makes me think that I don't want to visit him anymore!!! And I certainly have no desire to contribute to him leaving earlier. DOES THIS MEAN THAT I AM A BAD WIFE, A BAD PERSON?!

Despite the help and support shown to their partner, some women felt disillusioned because they encountered their partner's ingratitude, lack of improvement and even avoidance of responsibility for their loved ones and separation from them.

This time my husband got 25 years [...]. People in prison change a lot; they don't understand what we have to suffer through.... I've tried my best, too: hearings, visits, sleepless nights and so on. Unfortunately, I can't take it anymore [...]. I want to live a normal life, and he has already forgot how hard I tried to help him. He wants to file for divorce and he says this is my fault; he's appealing alimony as if the children don't matter to him.... Sometimes I'm just fed up with everything.

The emotional cost of a relationship with a partner with a criminal lifestyle was also borne by the women after they discovered that they had been treated as instruments, sometimes to the point that when they were no longer "useful" after serving their sentence, the man broke up with them.

I was with a man who was serving a prison sentence of almost two years. It was not his first sentence. I helped him, I went to the visits. I loved him very much. He came out and said that he already had a new family and that I should get away from him. That is how he thanked me. I'm very sad, I think I still love him.

Some women felt fear when in a relationship with a repeat offender. This feeling motivated them to obey him. Even if he did not currently threaten them directly because he was serving a prison sentence, they feared that if they left him he would take revenge when he got out of prison.

The last time I was with him before Christmas, I was also instructed on what to do and what to arrange due to the fact that my husband has filed an appeal and the appeal case is due soon [...]. I have no desire to do that. But there is another problem in all this. I'm afraid that if I don't do it, he'll take revenge. I don't know how and I don't know where, but I'm just still afraid of him.... How do I get rid of this fear, how do I start living for myself and for the children, knowing that he is there?

For many women, being in a relationship with a criminal had some consequences in the area of social relationships, as it collided with fulfilling social obligations and caused tensions with people from their own social environment.

He repeats that he loves me and increasingly trusts that I can be with him until the end. However, this is making me exhausted [...]. I'm neglecting my responsibilities at home, my work and my school. In addition, this situation has worsened my relationship with my parents, because they see that any contact with this man, instead of motivating me and giving me hope that I will be happy one day, is making me more and more depressed.

To avoid escalating tensions with family members who disapproved of their helping the offender, the women stopped sharing their problems. Some knew in advance that their loved ones would not be understanding and that they would even face negative labels, so they did not involve them in their role as rescuers. Thus, they helped the offender alone and in secret, which resulted in an overwhelming sense of loneliness.

One is left alone with everything, because it's embarrassing to admit all this to normal people who have nothing to do with all this pathology [...]. The only family members for me are my pets. This is madness.

For some women, negative experiences manifested themselves in a sense of detachment from one's life which resembled depersonalisation.

It's a known fact that I have to go to work, so then I switch and start pretending to be normal, even though inside I have such an emptiness and feel like I'm not myself and live in an imaginary world.

Conclusion

During the analysis, the properties that characterise codependency with an alcoholic were identified in women's relationships with repeat offenders. All the basic types of behaviour described in the literature as being specific to people pathologically attached to an alcoholic were observed. Taking the conceptual grid developed to describe codependency in relationships with alcoholics as the basis, the following behaviours extracted in the research were identified: attempting to stabilise and control the man's criminal activity, submitting to the rhythm of life influenced by this activity, providing unconditional help and support to the man, using psychological defence mechanisms to reduce his responsibility for the crime and/or to minimise the significance of the crime itself, justifying one's own involvement in the relationship with the repeat offender by activating illusions and fantasies and tolerating the partner's pathological behaviour, including domestic violence.

By manifesting these behaviours, the women created a cycle that may have been of value to themselves (e.g. they presented an image of a person who is described in the literature as attractive to offenders; see Szczepanik, Miszewski 2016: 72; Łukaszek 2018: 261; Raś 2019: 358) and that may have been comfortable for the convict (e.g. because the women, through their behaviour, made them feel that they were in charge of their relationship, thus confirming that they have qualities valued among prisoners [Szczepanik 2017: 185]). At the same time, this cycle had a negative effect. For the women, the consequences of codependency were as follows: the health and financial costs of helping the offender; negative emotions (guilt, disappointment, fear and lowered self-esteem); a lack of understanding from the social environment, together with isolation and rejection;

being a victim of manipulation, deception, objectification and sometimes emotional and physical violence. Despite the unpleasant consequences of remaining in a relationship with a repeat offender, some women did not see the need for a change; moreover, some of them did not even want a different life (according to one statement, *one can love a “bandit” with all one’s heart, despite everything, and not be able to function in this grey world without him*). Others, even once they had perceived the destructiveness of their relationship and the possibility of getting out of it appeared, remained in it, which only proves their dependence on their partner.

Women suffering the negative consequences of a pathological attachment to a repeat offender have the opportunity to change their situation by taking part in individual therapy. It could also be helpful for them to form self-help groups. Such groups can be seen as a stage before seeking professional help (especially if they redirect women to institutions and individuals offering appropriate help) or as a complement to it; for some, it may be the only source of support. Self-help groups for people whose loved one is in a penitentiary are not new, although they are rare in Poland. One of the few is the Facebook group “Greetings to the Prison” (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/614429265841464>), which has 2,500 members; moreover, Polish citizens can use the “St Nicholas Trust” in Cork, Ireland—online and in the city (<https://www.stnicholastrust.ie/pl/>). Researchers of penitentiary issues recognise the numerous advantages of self-help groups dedicated to the relatives of convicted people, mainly as a source of information, an exchange of experiences and a space in which to express grief and the sense of loss and to establish new relationships, thus minimising the experience of exclusion (Szczepanik, Miszewski 2016: 63–64).

Since the attitude of a woman dependent on a repeat offender is, to some extent, a product of the characteristics and behaviours of both partners, and since it is also destructive for the man (as it does not encourage him to stop his criminal activity), it is also worth considering interventions for repeat offenders. In prison, these could take the form of educational programmes aiming to foster a change in the way they perceive the events related to their relationship. The idea seems feasible, especially due to the fact that the Prison Service already has experience in a related area—programmes for convicted

perpetrators of domestic violence, in which thousands of prisoners participate annually.³

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