

# Jailed mom purges her pain with daughters

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Programme allows imprisoned women to express remorse for their crimes

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**S**usanna Theron struggled to maintain her composure as she softly asked her daughters' forgiveness for murdering their father.

As far as the state is concerned, Theron (47) has served four years of a life sentence for the killing of her husband George in 1998.

But, she says, she acted out of desperation against a violent, abusive spouse – and yesterday was the day she had to make peace with her daughters.

For 12 weeks, Theron and 24 other inmates of Johannesburg Prison dared to trust Heartwork, a volunteer organisation keen on healing and seeing the personal growth of women prisoners with regard to their emotions and their past.

The idea was for them to accept responsibility for their crimes and make peace with their victims.

Theron, in front of fellow inmates, victims and other visitors, nervously fingered the pages she had spent hours writing. Looking up, she saw how everyone was waiting for her to speak.

Eventually she folded it away. Her past was engraved so deeply in her memory that it wasn't necessary to read her notes – and eventually tears streamed down her cheeks.

George had sexually and physically abused her throughout their marriage, and worked her and her four daughters "like slaves" in a smallholding they owned in Vanderbijlpark.



**Forgive me ...** Susanna Theron, jailed for life for the murder of her husband, hugs one of her daughters who attended a special meeting at Johannesburg Prison. A project set up to enable women to come to terms with their crimes drew confessions and tears.

It was an ambivalent relationship of love and hate with her husband. Most times she resented his having lots of women, and his obsession with "having sex" all the time.

"He even told the reverend of our church that love for him was sex," Theron said.

It was from this same clergyman that she found out that two of her daughters were victims of their father, too – he had molested them.

His own family knew the type of person he was because "he beat his own father and even broke his father's foot once".

Not recognising that she was an abused woman, she took him back a second time even when he had left her after getting another woman pregnant.

"For a year we had a good marriage and he said he would change. But he didn't, he started again," she said, her shoulders shaking.

"He got another woman pregnant and it was also this time that I found out that he was molesting another one of my daughters, who was 14 then," she added.

Theron left him a second time, and her husband tried to commit suicide.

And even though George was in a coma for days, Theron didn't have the heart to pull the plug.

Despite his infidelities, his beatings and his monstrous ways, she still loved him and was dependent on him.

She ended up looking after him when he came out of a coma and went back to their smallholding. Her paralytic husband retained his crude ways and swore at her all the time.

"One day, my daughter told her boyfriend and me that she wasn't molested but was raped by her father's friend," said

Theron, sobbing openly.

"She begged her father to help her but he just laughed in her face and allowed his friend to rape her," continued Theron.

At this point, the murder was planned. Her daughter's boyfriend shot Theron's husband. Theron pleaded guilty to a charge of premeditated murder, for which she received her life sentence. Her daughter's boyfriend got 10 years.

Three of Theron's daughters attended yesterday's event and painfully listened to their mother reliving her past, and her appeal for their forgiveness.

But it wasn't necessary.

They had forgiven their mother years ago, and to this day have supported her. Amid applause and the tears from the crowd, she sat down with her daughters, and each one embraced her.

Throughout the day, all 25 inmates spoke of their crimes and held themselves accountable for what they had done – ranging from murder to fraud, armed robbery and acting as drug couriers. Fifteen of these inmates were abused women, and seven of these had murdered their husbands.

Each one spoke of the benefits of the Heartwork course.