

## **The social and economic costs of female imprisonment: the prisoners' point of view**

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### **Introduction**

Recent prison studies emphasise the need to abandon views of offenders as socially isolated members of society, as such views fail to recognise that families and communities are also affected by penal policies (Pattillo *et al.*, 2004). Some studies have therefore begun to raise questions about the unintended consequences (Clear, 1996) or collateral costs of imprisonment (Cunha, 2008; Hagan and Dinovitzer, 1999; Mauer and Chesney-Lind, 2002; Travis and Waul, 2003). Recognising the multiple facets of prisoners' identities – as fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, partners, local residents, workers and, indeed, citizens – means highlighting the ways in which people in prison continue to count for their families and communities (Western, Pattillo & Weiman, 2004: 11-12).

A substantial body of interdisciplinary literature has been produced on the hidden costs of imprisonment (Braman, 2002; Comfort, 2008; Ferraro *et al.*, 1983). In particular, the impact of incarceration on families ranges from financial hardship, emotional issues, feelings of shame and social stigma and the experience of being involved with prison routines (through visits and other ways of maintaining contact), to reconfigurations of family roles and responsibilities in the household (Arditti, 2005; Comfort, 2007; Hagan and Dinovitzer, 1999; Hairston, 2002; Light and Campbell, 2006). Among the multiple collateral consequences of imprisonment (Mauer and Chesney-Lind, 2002; Pattillo *et al.*, 2004), this paper intends to assess the social and economic cost of women's imprisonment from the women's point of view, by considering their own perceptions of the roles they formerly played in family life and support networks prior to imprisonment.

Drawing on doctoral research conducted by the authors (Granja *et al.*, ongoing), this paper explores the impact of imprisonment on women and their families in Portugal.

### **The selectivity of the penal system and its impact on low-income communities**

Prisoners tend to be disproportionately drawn from poor and minority communities (Wacquant, 2000). Although imprisonment affects all social groups and can occur in any neighbourhood, it is more prevalent among deprived groups in poor urban communities (Clear, 2002: 184). Therefore, the collateral effects of imprisonment tend to have a more intensive impact on these communities. The unintended consequences of imprisonment may be extensive, damaging social and financial capital, overburdening and eroding informal support networks (Cunha, 2002; 2008; Pattillo *et al.*, 2004), destabilising marital dynamics and child care arrangements (Granja *et al.*, 2012a; 2012b) and affecting informal social control (Lynch and Sabol, 2004).

Since the prison system has a significant influence on poor and minority urban neighbourhoods, imprisonment is an increasingly normal event in the lives of members of such neighbourhoods, often affecting a wide range of family and community networks (Cunha, 2002). The spatial centralisation of incarceration disrupts social

networks based on kinship and friendship, since it depletes human, social and economic resources, and increasingly overburdens those who remain available to help (Cunha, 2013). Thus, the concentrated expansion of the penal system challenges family and community 'elasticity', a concept developed by Sandra Enos which she defines as 'the ability of family units to accommodate additional members and responsibilities during times of crisis' (Enos, 1998: 61).

As Cunha has noted in the Portuguese context, in the face of insufficient public services or social policies designed to reduce the impact of imprisonment, the 'welfare society' (see Santos, 1993) – in other words, family and community resources and support – assumes the role designed for state welfare and acts as 'a "pillow" that (...) soften the harshness of a life that would otherwise benefit from little (formal) protection in crucial aspects, especially among the poor' (Cunha, 2013: 82).

This process is highly gendered, since the welfare society acts mainly through kinship ties and especially women. As Sílvia Portugal points out, 'what is mobilised is not exactly the family, but the women of the family' (2008: 32). In the Portuguese context, women are central to creating and maintaining community support networks, given that they are mainly responsible for providing assistance to the elderly and to dependent relatives, (Portugal, 1995; Torres, 2002) and financial and emotional support for relatives serving prison sentences (Condry, 2007; Cunha, 2002). Therefore, female solidarity is central to the maintenance and activation of informal support, and the costs of the 'welfare society' are borne mainly by women, thus revealing gender inequalities (Portugal, 1995; 2008; Santos, 1993).

The already overburdened role of women as 'family and community caregivers' in low-income families and neighbourhoods is further complicated by the constant threat of possible arrest and detention faced by women themselves and/or their family members (Richie, 2002: 145-146). Family arrangements always face the potential erosion of human (and economic) resources due to the actions of the penal system, which leads to fewer adults remaining available to assume care and financial responsibilities during imprisonment (Cunha, 2002).

Thus the penal system, in absorbing and overloading the few available support networks in deprived communities, may be contributing towards increasing poverty and social vulnerability, both for prisoners (Marchetti, 2002) and their families (Hanlon *et al.*, 2007).

### **The family: a gendered institution**

In recent years a wealth of interdisciplinary literature has sought to explore the profound changes that have challenged the traditional notion of the family as anchored in the institution of (heterosexual) marriage or cohabitation. The changes are varied, complex and constrained by historical, economic, political and cultural factors, and by individual trajectories permeated by gender, social class, race and stage of life (Collier and Sheldon, 2008).

In general terms, the decline of the male breadwinner, coupled with the large number of women entering the labour market as well as their continuing involvement in waged labour after they have had children, have been recurring themes in this literature (Collier

and Sheldon, 2008; Torres, 2004). Other key interlinking themes include the diversity and heterogeneity of parental 'family practices', the rising divorce rate, the dissociation between conjugality and parenting – corroborated by the growing importance of single parent households (Wall and Lobo, 1999) – and the decreasing size of families. Together these dynamic processes and multiple reconfigurations have contributed towards a significant shift in our understanding of what constitutes a family, and have highlighted the need to move away from the notion of the family as a 'given' and towards an increasingly fluid and diverse institution (Smart and Neale, 1999).

With regard to the social and economic costs of female imprisonment, the focus of this paper lies in understanding the logic that surrounds the 'performance' of family life during periods of enforced change, including an appreciation of the fluidity and diversity of different family forms and connections. This approach resists the concept of the family which characterises most prison studies literature – namely heterosexual couples with children – and acknowledges the complexity and diversity of family practices and composition (Almond, 2006; Smart and Neale, 1999).

A gender-sensitive approach is also crucial to assessing women's experiences, perceptions and representations. Studies in Portugal on the role of women in the family (Torres, 2002), women's experiences of transgression (Duarte, 2011) and victimisation (Alves and Maia, 2010), and their contact with the justice (Beleza, 1990; Machado, 2004) and prison system (Cunha, 1994; 2002) have demonstrated the importance of addressing women's experiences from a gender perspective in order to portray and understand the specific features that surround and embody women's lives (Matos and Machado, 2007).

As in other countries, the male prison population in Portugal is disproportionately higher than female prison population (94 per cent versus 6 per cent) (Direção-Geral de Reinserção e Serviços Prisionais, 2014). Despite the growing importance assigned to a gender perspective, most of the literature on the social impacts of incarceration has typically considered the consequences of male imprisonment, meaning that very little of the debate focuses specifically on the collateral effects of female incarceration (but see Cunha, forthcoming). Framing this debate so narrowly in male-centred terms ignores the gendered consequences of imprisonment and the central role of women in community and family dynamics (Richie, 2002).

The family is a highly gendered institution and men and women experience family life, parenting and romantic relationships in different ways and play different roles in the organisation of the household (Aboim, 2006; Portugal, 1995; Torres, 2002). Therefore, as prison studies literature has shown, an imposed separation from family life has different consequences for women and men (Sharp *et al.*, 1998; Tasca *et al.*, 2011), particularly in terms of childcare (Cunha and Granja, forthcoming; Ferraro and Moe, 2003; Johnson and Waldfogel, 2004), but also due the central role that women play as economic and care providers (European Commission, 2005). In fact, the majority of prisoners who are mothers are generally the primary carers of children prior to imprisonment (Ferraro and Moe, 2003; Hairston, 1991). They also tend to be the sole or main source of household income, as the fathers are already either in prison or absent (Greene *et al.*, 2000; Henriques, 1996). If sent to prison, many mothers cannot therefore entrust their children to the care of their fathers, whereas the reverse rarely occurs: when the father is imprisoned, the children usually stay together with the mother under the

same roof. When the mother is imprisoned, the children often end up separated from both parents as well as from brothers and sisters, since siblings are distributed among other relatives, neighbours or institutions (Cunha, 2002; 2013; Palomar Vereá, 2007).

Given that most women, prior to imprisonment, play an active part in the maintenance and structure of their families, imprisonment highlights the realignment and reconfigurations that occur in family roles, responsibilities and relationships when a woman is sent to prison. It is, therefore, a phenomenon that invites reflection on the gendered consequences of women's imprisonment, including an assessment of the fluidity and diversity of family forms and connections.

## **Methodology**

The social and economic cost of women's imprisonment was explored from the point of view of women themselves, drawing on interviews with twenty inmates of a women's prison in Portugal and considering their perceptions of the role they had played in family life prior to imprisonment. The interviews took place between April and September 2011 and had an average duration of one hour and forty minutes.

The women interviewed were serving sentences mainly for drug trafficking and property offences. The sentences ranged from two years and seven months to 25 years, with eighteen women serving sentences of more than four and a half years. The majority of the interviewees came from precarious economic, social and cultural backgrounds, reflecting the trends shown in other national and international studies on female inmates (European Commission, 2005; Cunha, 2002). The women had very low levels of educational and social capital: most women only completed six years of schooling and, prior to imprisonment; the majority had been dependent on the welfare system due to low incomes and high rates of unemployment. All the women interviewed were mothers, with an average of three children each, and their ages ranged from 20 to 52 years old. In terms of family composition, fourteen of the women had lived in a household consisting of their children and partner (not necessarily the father of the children) prior to their arrest.

## **Results**

Drawing on the prisoners' narratives, four scenarios emerged regarding the prevailing role of women in the family unit prior to imprisonment. The scenarios are not mutually exclusive and they all describe the following significant dimensions: the roles played by women in family life prior to imprisonment, the reconfiguration and realignment of family roles and responsibilities following imprisonment, the logic surrounding the activation of support networks, and the limitations and consequences of women's imprisonment for the family. The four scenarios are: i) women as single mothers, ii) women as lone mothers: family situations mediated by prison, iii) women as daughters, and iv) women as wives.

### *Women as single mothers*

In the period prior to imprisonment several women were the main or sole providers and carers for their children (Ferraro and Moe, 2003; Hairston, 1991). The fathers usually played a peripheral role in education and child support, or were completely absent from

their children's lives, exonerating themselves from any financial and emotional responsibility for their offspring (Machado and Granja, 2013). Some disadvantaged women who find it more difficult to meet the challenges of single parenthood (Faria, 2011; McCormack, 2005), resort to family support (cohabitation, informal care) to help reconcile timetables and the financial difficulties of single parenthood, and also to compensate for inadequate family policies in this area (Wall *et al.*, 2002).

Rita, aged 28, single and sentenced to 5 years for drug trafficking, has 3 children from different relationships. Before she went to prison Rita was the only care provider:

*There was one time I called him to say I needed money for my kid. I needed to go to the chemist's and I didn't have the money. (...) The more I said I didn't want a relationship with him, the more he hated my daughter. (...) He only recently began giving money for my daughter after I took him to court (...) Until then he never, never, never, never, gave anything, not even a loaf of bread.*

When Rita was sent to prison she was unable to leave the children in the care of their respective fathers since they were always absent. Rita's mother, a 65 year old cleaning lady living in an economically deprived neighbourhood in very vulnerable financial circumstances was therefore the only person available for childcare. However, she was reluctant to care for her three grandchildren due to the strain of living on a very low income:

*[During the trial] I knew I would go to prison and my mum had always told me "if you're arrested I'll take care of the older children but I won't take care of the youngest" and I didn't know what would happen to my youngest daughter.*

However, after Rita went to prison her mother became responsible for her three grandchildren, aged 13, 8 and 3.

Maria, aged 35 and sentenced to 6 years for attempted murder, was given custody of her daughter after her divorce. Before she went to prison she had started living with her boyfriend and her daughter. After the divorce, the father played a more peripheral role in the child's life, both emotionally - with fortnightly visits - and financially - partly contributing to the child's upkeep. When Maria was sent to prison she left her daughter in the care of an aunt and her child's father continued to play a secondary role in the life of his daughter, 'When I came here I had to leave my daughter safe somewhere, and the only thing I could do was leave her with her aunt'.

When women are sent to prison, the role of the fathers remains the same, characterised by total absence or intermittent presence. Conversely, family members - such as grandparents or aunts - who have already given the mother informal support, assume full custody, albeit temporarily, even if this increases the social vulnerability of some families.

#### Women as lone mothers: family situations mediated by prison

Sometimes the imprisonment of a family member creates a temporary, involuntary, single parent household (Arditti, 2005). In this study, twelve of the women interviewed had, at some point in their lives, had partners serving prison sentences. Some, but not

all, of these women maintained relationships with their imprisoned partners for long periods of time, thus creating an involuntary single parent household. Another element that also characterised romantic relationships for most of these women was drug addiction or alcoholism in their partners. In some cases, the same relationship involved both imprisonment and addiction issues (see Comfort, 2008; Granja *et al.*, 2012a).

In this family configuration, domestic groups centre on the mother, since the man is often absent due to imprisonment, or plays a passive role, being dependent on the woman's wages as a result of drug addiction or alcoholism and tending to drain rather than contribute to the family budget (Comfort, 2008; European Commission, 2005: 36).

In these situations women assume a central place in the family as the only breadwinner in the house, supporting their husbands – as prisoners or drug addicts – as well as their dependent children. This was the case with Claudia, aged 35 and serving a sentence of 4 years and 8 months for drug trafficking, who has one 11 year old daughter. Despite a marriage which lasted 12 years, she only lived with her husband for a short period of time: *'I was with him for 12 years, but to tell you the truth I only lived with him for two and a half years. Because he was always in prison (...) He lived with the girl for a year and a half'*. During the time he spent in prison, Claudia visited her husband regularly and provided him with emotional and financial support - which can be a very heavy burden for low-income families (see Christian, 2005). During the short periods of time that Claudia's husband was at home, *I was working, he wasn't. (...) I was the one who covered all the expenses for the house and children. (...) He spent all his money on drugs, more than he earned'*.

In addition to imprisoned partners, many women may have other family members also serving time in prison. Claudia, now in prison, is doing time together with her husband and two siblings. Thus, after Claudia's imprisonment, her parents – who are 60 and 56 years old – became mainly responsible for supporting all the members of the family who were in prison (in two different prisons) and caring for two grandchildren (Claudia's daughter and nephew):

*My parents don't have much money, with us all in prison and them taking care of two grandchildren. (...) My mother still says it was robbery. My mother says that the police robbed her, stole her two daughters. And she feels helpless (...); all of my parents' children are in prison and they have two grandchildren to take care of on the outside.*

Sometimes the erosion of support networks is so great that no one on the outside is able to support both imprisoned relatives and dependent family members. Isabel, aged 32 and serving a five-year sentence for drug trafficking, has 3 children. When she went to prison most of her family (her parents, several siblings, and partner) were already doing time, and her only option was to leave her children, aged 14, 8 and 6, in foster care:

*'Everybody was in prison, I had no support from anyone. (...) So I chose to give them [the children] to those gentlemen [a social institution] so they could take care of them'*.

Prior to imprisonment, the women bore extensive and heavy responsibilities for raising children and taking care of the family. After they were sent to prison, these roles were either assumed by social institutions or transferred to other family members, who

subsequently had to divide their time and resources between multiple family members in need of assistance – adult sons and daughters in prison and dependent grandchildren – in order to visit family members in prison, care for children (see also Cunha, 2008: 339) and reconcile these responsibilities with work.

### Women as daughters

Before they were sent to prison, the lifestyles of some had been mainly characterised by continuous drug abuse, drifting between the labour market and criminal activity. Despite their drug addiction, which had multiple personal and family consequences (Gonçalves and Pereira, 1982; Pires, 2004), some women maintained strong ties with family members, especially with their mothers and siblings, financially and emotionally supporting and being supported by them.

They maintained precarious relationships with their offspring, since the accumulated problems that marked their lives (lack of resources and suitable housing, drug addiction, alcoholism, crime) had led to the termination of parental rights when the children were young or even newborn (Granja *et al.*, 2012b). In some cases the mothers had taken this decision to ensure the children had a more secure and stable environment than they could provide for them; in other cases it was the child welfare system or family intervention that had removed the children from the woman's care, even if the mother wanted to raise them herself. Generally, in both scenarios, family members assumed responsibility for child care, but when they were unable to provide care, the children were placed in foster homes. When the women were sent to prison, the children therefore remained in the same environment, not experiencing direct consequences of imprisonment, although other relatives – such as parents and siblings – generally experienced some impacts.

Sandra, aged 25 and sentenced to seven years for theft, lived with her mother, father and brothers and contributed significantly to the household income. *'We didn't have a good standard of living at home but with my job we always had a little something to eat, and we could pay our bills'*. In the years that followed she became a drug addict but continued to contribute to the family income. After she was sent to prison, the loss of Sandra's income left the family, especially her mother who is 64 years old and retired due to disability, in poverty:

*In my head I was responsible for my family's misfortunes. The troubles that my mother started to have after I was sent down, starving, not having this, not having that... I was to blame for that. That's what I thought. (...) My mother told me she had got so behind with the rent that she had been sent a letter saying that if she didn't pay at least one or two instalments by a certain date, she would be evicted.*

Before she went to prison Madalena, aged 36 and a drug addict sentenced to 4 years and 6 months for drug trafficking, took care of her dependent mother, aged 65, on a daily basis. After she was sentenced, her mother became dependent on some neighbours helping sporadically, and also on assistance from charity institutions. However, most of the time Madalena's mother is alone at home, which exacerbates Madalena's concerns:

*I went to my mother's house every day. I worked till 7, 8 pm and then I went to my mother's, no matter what time of day it was. (...) My mother needs me for everything. She is disabled... (...) she wears diapers, she needs me to dress her, feed her, get her up, take her to the bathroom, everything. (...) Now a neighbour is taking care of her... (...) The Santa Casa da Misericórdia [a charity institution] also goes there but if you don't take her off the wheelchair, she doesn't eat. She is completely dependent. She is shut up at home, alone, during the night. The neighbour walks away and locks the door - what if something happens?*

Unlike other women, these prisoners are somewhat more peripheral to childcare, although they are involved in complex arrangements for shared household resources and care which are interrupted when they are sent to prison. Their absence often places the family itself in jeopardy, leaving dependent people with limited or no care and financial support.

### Women as wives

One last family configuration concerns female prisoners formerly living in households consisting of a partner present in daily family life, dependent children and sometimes dependent elderly parents or other relatives. These women were usually active in the labour market, and their income, together with that of their partner, constituted the household budget. Yet, the women were mainly responsible for household chores, childcare and helping the elderly and other dependents (Portugal, 2008; Torres, 2004).

In this sample, 10 of the women interviewed were serving prison sentences as well as their partners - due to the fact that they were both involved in the same case - (Granja *et al.*, 2012a) and most had been living with their partners and other relatives prior to imprisonment. These dual sentences entail the removal of both members of the couple from households where both had been responsible for dependent children and elderly people. Maria Luísa, aged 44, was sentenced to 5 years for fraud and forgery, together with her husband. Before she was sent to prison she had been taking care of her 15 year old son and 73 year old father '*after my mother died, my father ate at my house, and I took care of his needs*'.

After the couple were sentenced, Maria Luisa's father became responsible for his grandson and the family income consisted only of his meagre retirement pension:

*My life totally fell apart. Out there I worked, and my husband did too and my son had a happy childhood, he didn't miss out on anything. The day I came here my kid missed everything. He missed his mother, his father ... I mean, now my father has to pay for the water, electricity and all the regular household bills. And he has to feed my son....*

This situation, in addition to restricting the lives of the elderly - who have to adapt to full-time care, nurturing, and protection of children (Landry-Meyer and Newman, 2004) - also entails adjusting to a meagre family budget. These reconfigurations generate a greater vulnerability to unforeseen events, which create concerns for parents in prison due to the likelihood of elderly people falling ill. This is exemplified by the case of Natalie, aged 32, serving a 14 year sentence for an aggravated offence resulting in



death, together with her husband. Natalie is concerned about her father-in-law's health, since he is 65 years old and is taking care of her 3 children, aged 16, 13 and 9:

*I am worried, (...) if anything happens, what's going to happen to my children? Who will take care of them? I'm here, and their father is in prison too. I pray to God every day to give my father-in-law good health. Every day I worry about it, every day, because my children have no one else except my father-in-law. He's the only person they have out there.*

The resources that women can draw on to provide financial support and care for their children and other dependent relatives while they are in prison vary widely. When families are doubly or triply affected by prison sentences the collateral consequences of imprisonment are even greater. Usually elderly grandparents, both men and women, formerly dependent on the care of others, reverse their position and become the ones mainly responsible for the care of dependent children. Women's imprisonment generally leads to a very depleted family network mainly affecting children and the elderly who, as dependents, are in a socially vulnerable position with fewer opportunities for improving their situation.

## **Conclusion**

In line with the growing recognition that the effects of imprisonment extend far beyond prisoners and significantly impact on their social networks, the aim of this paper has been to focus on the consequences of women's imprisonment for their relatives on the outside. According to the women's narratives, for the majority of families, women's imprisonment compounds social and economic disadvantage. This disadvantage mostly affects children and the elderly.

Despite the fluidity of family arrangements, most of the women's narratives highlighted the fact that they played an active part in the maintenance and structure of their family, being the central providers of care and economic resources prior to imprisonment.

Imprisonment of these women triggers a reconfiguration affecting their most intimate family environment and becomes increasingly serious when it affects poor families and communities. The reconfigurations of the household, even if temporary, become an ongoing process, forcing family members to reposition themselves in relation to unexpected life changes and leading to financial hardship and emotional issues.

In general, the people available to assume the roles played by women prior to imprisonment are their parents, who are also socially and economically deprived, and usually elderly. Assuming new responsibilities in addition to their existing ones often triggers a 'domino effect of social exclusion' for families (European Commission, 2005: 7), exacerbating their financially vulnerable situation. Older people tend to reverse their position within the family from that of a dependent to someone who is in charge of child care. In other situations, elderly people lose the person mainly responsible for their care and become dependent on informal community support.

Children are also in a vulnerable situation, since they generally lose their main or only carer, are usually deprived of both parents, and risk entering into an unstable cycle of child care placements, combining family, community and foster care (see Cunha, 2013;

Palomar, 2007). Children also face a clear reduction in the family budget since, in most cases an important share of the household income is lost. This is consistent with research showing that imprisonment can significantly increase levels of child poverty (DeFina and Hannon, 2010).

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