

**Mothering from prison and ideologies of intensive parenting: enacting *vulnerable*  
*resistance***

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## **Abstract**

“Intensive parenting” ideologies have been increasingly disseminated in popular culture, expert discourses and social policy. These have impacted particularly on mothers owing to their actual or presumed central role in child rearing. One of the main features of these ideologies is an increasing apportioning of rights and responsibilities to families without taking into account the resources needed to sustain the work of caring according to dominant social expectations.

Drawing on twenty interviews in a Portuguese female prison, this paper explores how mothering is enacted by underprivileged and criminalised women.

Data show a complex web of tensions between the norms implicit in “intensive parenting” ideologies and the actual practices which imprisoned mothers can accomplish. In their mothering from prison, women enact *vulnerable resistance* to the penal policies that undermine their primary role in child rearing. That is, prisoners creatively negotiate a space within which they can define themselves as “good mothers”.

**Keywords:** intensive parenting; mothering; imprisonment.

## Introduction

The current dominant model of parenthood in most Western societies is a recent historical creation based on what has been called "intensive parenting", a trend which has been increasingly disseminated in popular culture, expert discourses<sup>1</sup> and social policy (Furedi, 2002; Nicolson, 1993). This powerful ideal, based on dominant assumptions about how and under what conditions parents should rear their children, has impacted especially on mothers, since women still play – or are expected to play – a central role in childcare and education (Hays, 1996).

Despite their prevalence, dominant ideologies of parenthood emerge from specific social and class-based milieus and ignore the implications that gender, educational capital, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation and economic status impinge upon the social conditions of parenting (Holt, 2010; Jones, Frohwirth, & Moore, 2007; Umberson, Pudrovskaya, & Reczek, 2010). Therefore, these hegemonic conceptions misrepresent the plurality of mothers' and fathers' experiences' and exclude several categories of men and women from the dominant notion of parenting.

Among the several categories of women excluded from the social construct of "good mothers", imprisoned mothers illustrate a still relatively understudied connection among deviance, criminalisation, poverty, mothering and kinship. The focus of this paper will be on this significant proportion of economically disadvantaged and criminalised women who enact mothering in a very specific context: in the interface between prison – where the mother is placed – and the outside world – where the children are located. Our aim is two-fold: firstly, to explore how the norms implicit in "intensive mothering" are intertwined and mutually support and co-produce the values, rationalities and textured practices of being a mother in prison in Portugal; secondly, to discuss prisoners' *vulnerable resistance* to a fragmentary and incomplete mothering performance.

According to “intensive parenting” premises, in order to provide children with an “adequate” context for infant and youth development, parenthood must be performed within a very specific referential and in line with a set of expert prescriptions. The referential ideological model assumes that parenting must be enacted within the structure of the traditional nuclear family – that is, an adult heterosexual, preferably married couple. This ideal also prescribes dependent motherhood: the female economic dependence on the father of her child and within the structure of the Welfare State (Carlen & Worrall, 1987: 3), with parents assuming a responsible and co-operative role towards child rearing. According to this dominant ideal, mothers are, or should be, the primary carers of the children, and fathers must assume a more peripheral role in child care, except in terms of economic provision, thus reproducing and reinforcing the traditional gender division of labour in the family. Furthermore, mothers are expected to be self-sacrificing, wholly committed to rearing children; to provide unconditional love and attention; and to be endowed with instinctive *savoir-faire* and *maternal instinct*. In sum, mothers are expected to be all-powerful in ensuring their infants’ well-being and in directing and determining the children’s future (Lewis, 2002; Nicolson, 1993). These gendered prescribed behaviours are so prevalent in dominant discourses that they emerge as naturalised outcomes of maternal practices. One prevailing impact of these ideologies is to conceal the notion that mothering is a combination of individual responsibility, effort, commitment and willingness to sacrifice one’s personal interests for the sake of the children’s well-being (Badinter, 1981).

Turning parents, and particularly mothers, into individuals responsible for their infants’ actions and well-being implies that “good” parenting will produce positive outcomes and, in turn, “inadequate” parenting will generate deviant and unhealthy children (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2011: 986). Consequently, the causes for major health and social problems – from obesity and cancers to juvenile delinquency, recidivism and unemployment – ) are fully

attributed to the parents' individual behaviour (Lee, 2011), relocating the responsibility for these problems away from the wider social structure (Moore, 1996).

This way of addressing parenting is inscribed in a “wider tendency of modern society to individualise social problems and [to] seek solutions through interventions that influence people at an individual level” (Lee, 2011: 3). To hold parents as entirely responsible for their children is also fully in line with incipient or receding welfare regimes in Southern European countries such as Portugal, which end up relegating to the family – and particularly women – the responsibility for economic support and for caring (Portugal, 1999; Santos, 1993).

Therefore, although enmeshed in a language of love and affection, the current social construct of parenthood places strenuous expectations on fathers and especially on mothers (Traustadottir, 1991). The ability to parent according to dominant social expectations is inextricably linked to access to resources such as money, time, health, and social support, and deeply intersects with social class and status (Ferraro & Moe, 2003; Holt, 2010; McCormack, 2005; Pinto, 2011; Umberson, Pudrovska, & Reczek, 2010). However, apportioning increasing responsibility to families is often done without taking into consideration the material and situational realities needed to sustain the work of caring for children. Parents are encouraged to take full responsibility for caring for children and providing for them. This notion implies reducing the role of other individuals, institutions and the State in social reproduction, while being offered barely any support or resources (Moore, 1996). As Elizabeth Silva (1996: 5) points out, “turning women into providers without supplying them with adequate resources seems to imply that mothering can be sustained by natural, instinctual provision”. Even with minimal support, caring for others, and especially for children, is assumed as something that all women “naturally” and joyfully do, motivated and fuelled by love, and therefore caring constitutes the antithesis of onerous work (Lewis, 2002: 36).

Holding women as individually responsible for their children's outcomes, obscuring the strenuous work and commitment that mothering involves, ignoring the amount of resources needed to measure up to socially imposed standards, and stigmatising or pathologising mothers who cannot conform to these dominant ideologies, is particularly pernicious for underprivileged women. Increasingly apportioning rights and responsibilities to more socially vulnerable families, and especially to mothers, tends to generate additional pressure and subject them to extensive regulation and social control (Carlen & Worrall, 1987: 4; Eaton, 1986). Within this ideological framework of "intensive parenting", female prisoners comprise an important subset of under-resourced, criminalized and extensively monitored mothers.

In this paper, our aim is to explore the points of connection and detachment between the representations and practices defined by the dominant ideology of parenting and those reproduced by mothers in prison. Data show that there is a complex web of tensions between the norms implicit in dominant assumptions about mothering and the actual practices that can be accomplished by imprisoned women. When mothering in the interface between prison and the outside world, prisoners are mostly prevented from measuring up to hegemonic ideologies. Notwithstanding this, women enact a *vulnerable resistance* to penal policies undermining their primary role in child caring. That is, by circumventing imposed constraints, mothers in prison creatively negotiate a space within which they can define themselves as "good mothers".

### **Imprisoned mothers**

A body of interdisciplinary literature has consistently reported that imprisonment affects mainly disadvantaged and vulnerable women. Women sent to prison are generally subject to high degrees of economic and social deprivation that sometimes cumulatively

combine the material realities of poverty, low levels of educational capital, lack of suitable housing, criminal records, physical and/or sexual violence, substance abuse, mental health problems and single motherhood (Carlen, 1988; European Commission, 2005). Frequently female offenders also have family members involved with the criminal justice system or imprisoned (Cunha, 2008). Thus, in pre-prison situations, most women were already facing contexts of poverty and social vulnerability that hindered the full realisation of ideologies of “intensive parenting” (Cunha & Granja, 2013). As evidenced elsewhere, Portuguese female prisoners’ trajectories show that most mothers were, prior to imprisonment, extensively supported by kinship networks in terms of child-care; and, in particular cases, women played a peripheral role in their children’s lives because of the cumulative difficulties they faced (Granja, Cunha & Machado, 2013).

Upon imprisonment, new obstacles weaken women’s efforts to be “good mothers”, both in the subjective and the practical dimensions of mothering performance (Farrell, 1998). Firstly, because women’s conventional status as mothers is undermined, besides breaking social rules, prisoners also break their conventional gendered roles, being *deviant as women* (Heidensohn, 1987: 20). Female criminality by those who are mothers, thus challenges society’s idealisation of the mothering role (Enos, 2001; Farrell, 1998: 54). Secondly, because imprisonment limits or prevents most practices traditionally associated with parenting, such as care, provision, discipline, and education, it presents significant obstacles to prisoners’ – male and female – ability to maintain contact with their children (Hairston, 2007; Swisher & Waller, 2008).

As has been shown in contexts such as the USA and France, current criminal justice policies are interwoven with cumulative and overlapping disciplinary forms that balance goals of safety and control with rehabilitation and prevention of de-socialization (Craig, 2004). Within this framework, relationships between prisoners and their relatives are enacted

at the intersection of these contradictory regulatory principles in which there is a prevalence of control-oriented organizational models (Touraut, 2012). This implies that all prison policies endorsing family interactions – such as visiting, birthday celebrations, home leaves, and parole – are extensively monitored, controlled and conditional on a *modus operandi* which places a primary emphasis on discipline, authority and surveillance, rather than on the upholding of social ties (Ferraro, Johnson, Jorgensen, & Bolton, 1983; Radelet, Vandiver, & Berardo, 1983: 606). Family contacts are defined as a privilege of prisoners, rather than a right of the family as a whole (Farrell 1998; Wacquant 2002: 376). That is, ‘privileges’, defined as access to more and improved opportunities for family interaction, may be extended if the prisoners exhibit good behaviour, or conversely, restricted and forbidden if they do not comply with rules and regulations.

In Portugal the penal system has, in theory, adopted innovative measures regarding the performance of parenting *in* prison, by allowing men and women to keep their offspring with them during imprisonment<sup>ii</sup>. However, mothers and fathers engaged in parenting *through* prison walls still remain largely without specific policies directed towards their parenting. Portuguese prisoners’ opportunities to connect with children in the care of outside support networks are highly contingent on institutional surveillance and prison restrictions (Granja, Cunha & Machado, 2013).

In addition to institutional restraints, the selection of child placements and carers also represents a major issue for imprisoned parents because of the direct repercussions for the relationship between prisoners and children during the prison sentence (Enos, 2001). Prior to imprisonment, most women bore extensive responsibilities of childcare (Hairston, 2007: 5). Most of the fathers were absent from their children’s lives, and played a peripheral role in education and child support (European Commission, 2005: 36). Thus, when sent to prison, most mothers cannot entrust their children to the care of their absent fathers, and children



usually cannot stay in the same living arrangements as previously (Ferraro & Moe, 2003). In Portugal, the mobilisation of child-care support networks during mothers' imprisonment generally follows broader patterns of the activation of informal support in everyday life (Portugal, 1999). That is, children are usually cared for by kinship networks, in particular by other women, during the mother's imprisonment (Cunha, 2013), a scenario that also prevails in other countries (Hairston, 2007). However, patterns of placement differ across families, and kin keeping may not be an option equally available to or chosen by all prisoners (Enos, 2001: 43-74). Family assistance is often insufficient and limited, especially among underprivileged informal support networks within families that have several members imprisoned (Cunha, 2008). When relatives are not able to assume child-care, this can lead children into an unpredictable circuit in which they often end up deprived of both parents, and of brothers and sisters as well, as siblings are distributed among kin, neighbours or institutions (Cunha, 2013; Palomar, 2007: 91).

Regardless of the several limitations on their mothering performance, prisoners generally remain deeply connected to their maternal identity (European Commission, 2005: 36; Martin, 1997). Imprisoned mothers continuously try to engage in activities that allow them to participate in their children's lives (Celinska & Siegel, 2010; Palomar, 2007) and plan to reunite with children after imprisonment, resuming their previous roles (Ferraro & Moe, 2003).

In this article, drawing on imprisoned mothers' narratives, our goal is to outline women's perceptions of their mothering role and explore how prisoners negotiate child rearing obstacles that constantly challenge their parenting performance.

Erika Horwitz, analysing how non-prisoner mothers resist dominant discourses of motherhood, shows that women's resistance, which compounds a complex and unfolding process, is not only contingent on how individuals endeavour to position themselves, but is

also highly dependent upon the social and structural supports available to them (2003: 175). Within the prison context, support for imprisoned mothers, to the extent that it exists, occurs within a framework where penal monitoring prevails over the upholding of family ties and where kinship support may present several difficulties. Therefore, mothers' possibilities for resistance are highly fragile. Prisoners' efforts to carry out mothering roles on their own terms are significantly conditioned and restrained due to their scarce resources, strained kinship networks and limited institutional support.

## **Methodology**

This article is part of research conducted in Portugal the main purpose of which is to explore, from the female and male prisoners' perspective, as well as from their relatives' point of view, the familial and social impacts of imprisonment. A qualitative study was undertaken to explore, in depth, how the reconfiguration of social roles and responsibilities upon imprisonment is enacted and how this reframing is shaped by gender and social and economic status. The analysis presented in this article derives from data gathered from twenty interviews with female prisoners in a Portuguese prison between April and September 2011. The participants' verbal consent to conduct and record the interviews was obtained after they were informed about the study's aim and their anonymity was guaranteed. The interviews lasted, on average, a hundred minutes and the tapes were transcribed verbatim.

A purposive sample was used, which means that new data was added to the analysis when of theoretical interest (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Participants were selected according to the information that respondents could provide about the situation under study. All participants are Portuguese, convicted, had been imprisoned for more than six months and had at least one child. Five respondents are Roma/Gypsies<sup>iii</sup>.

The interviews focused on the women's life stories, their family and intimate relationships and issues regarding their children, both before and during incarceration. For the purposes of this article we shall focus exclusively on a partial analysis of the interviews, exploring the dynamics underlying mothering from prison. Data were systematically categorised and synthesised into two themes: the meanings of mothering from prison, unravelling the points of connection and detachment between "intensive parenting" ideologies and imprisoned mothers representations and practices; and the *vulnerable resistance* enacted by prisoners.

The majority of the interviewees came from precarious economic, social and cultural backgrounds, reflecting trends shown in other national and international studies on female prisoners (Carlen, 1988; Cunha, 2008; European Commission, 2005). The participants ranged in age from 20 to 52 years old, with an average age of 36. The women had low levels of education and social status: nine had fewer than five years of schooling and, prior to imprisonment, the majority had been dependent on welfare owing to low incomes, precarious work conditions, and high rates of unemployment. All the interviewed women were mothers, with an average of three children each<sup>iv</sup> and all had minor children in the care of outside support. The mean age of children was 12 years old.

Eight women interviewed were serving sentences for property offences and seven prisoners were convicted of crimes related to drug trafficking. Five participants were imprisoned because of crimes against people. Respondents' sentences ranged from two years and seven months to 25 years<sup>v</sup>. Eighteen women were serving sentences of more than four and a half years.

## **The meanings of mothering from prison**

Imprisoned women talk extensively about the joy they derive from mothering, even in a context as limited as the prison. The maintaining of strong ties with children represents the main motivation for prisoners to cope with separation, to manage daily difficulties of imprisonment and to focus on the future, planning the family reunion. Natália, aged 32, is a first time offender serving a sentence of 14 years for aggravated assault, which resulted in death. Her narrative emphasises how her three children are a major encouragement in coping with everyday prison hardships.

*I have three wonderful children. I hold myself close to them, I speak with them every day, and they are the ones who give me strength, affection and support. Some days I'm saddest, and I call them and they notice I'm upset and they give me strength and courage.*

Yet, alongside the highlights, prisoners also discuss the permanent anxiety and blame arising from the imposed separation from children. In other words, two distinct views co-exist in the mother's narratives: on the one hand, children are a source of hope and motivation in coping with imprisonment (Celinska & Siegel, 2010). On the other hand, women articulate mothering as a site of distress since detachment from their children fosters guilt and anxiety (Ferraro & Moe, 2003).

Margarida, aged 30, is a recidivist sentenced to 3 years and 3 months for minor drug trafficking. She has two daughters, one with her in prison, and the other in the care of outside support. Margarida's narrative shows how she blames herself for not being present in her older daughter's life and for transferring the responsibility of caring to others during both times she was in prison.

*Even now I feel angry. I feel sad inside. I feel bitter because I didn't take care of her, because I was arrested, I wasn't around for my daughter. It had to be my parents who took care of her.*

As shown by Margarida, imprisoned mothers share concerns about their own inadequacies about fulfilling social ideals related to “good mothering”. Upon imprisonment, when someone else other than the mother assumes full responsibility – albeit temporary – for the child’s care, two commonly blurred meanings of care are dissociated, namely: “caring for” and “caring about” (Traustadottir, 1991). “Caring for” regards the demanding physical *work* of looking after children, which prisoners are prevented from assuming. “Caring about” refers to feelings of *love* and affection that continue in the prison context. Mothering from prison, therefore, defies the cultural understanding of mothering as “confined to a specific model of caring activity” (Smart, 1992: 15), and detaches from one another two meanings of care – love and work – which are often interlinked in scholarly literature and in women’s own accounts of mothering (Lewis, 2002: 37; Traustadottir, 1991). Nevertheless, these two forms of caring are also blurred in the prisoners narratives. Since imprisoned mothers do not clearly distinguish caring work from love, they perceive their maternal performance as fragmentary and incomplete. The restraint that imprisoned mothers have to face of being unable to take care of their children promotes feelings of dysfunctionality and guilt.

Mothers in prison also feel unable to act upon their children. Powerlessness is magnified when children face difficult situations on the outside, and mothers cannot directly assist them. Madalena, aged 36, is a first time offender sentenced to 4 years and 6 months for drug trafficking. She has two children in an institution. For Madalena the periods in which her 15 years old daughter escapes from the institution are the worst, because she feels powerless to assist her and has scarce information about her where she is.

*When she runs away I do not feel well. I'm always concerned. I'm afraid. I know that if I was out there I could help her, right? But I'm imprisoned. I can't do anything.*

Sometimes mothers' contacts with children during imprisonment are scarce due to the family's lack of resources to sustain frequent contacts, especially visits that are more costly<sup>vi</sup>. Periods of separation may promote the mothers increased anxiety, dismay, and alienation from their children, especially if the women are absent during significant moments in the child's development (first words, beginning of crawling and walking, among others). Rita, aged 28, is a first time offender sentenced to 5 years for drug trafficking. She has three children. Rita did not see her youngest daughter during the initial period she spent in prison. Her narrative shows how, during the first visit, she experienced alienation from her youngest daughter, since shared strangeness became more apparent.

*The first days, weeks, my mother didn't bring my daughter to see me (...). Then, when she came, I was devastated because she was already walking! When she came walking towards me, I was stunned! How come she started walking in such a short time? (...) And then I called her, she looked at me and it seemed like she was seeing the devil. She screamed, yelled... clung to the neck of my mother, saying she didn't want [to be here]. She has forgotten me.*

Scenarios of coordinated care, such as during imprisonment, when someone else is assisting the mother in child rearing, challenge the "biologization" of the mothering role. As shown by Rita's narrative, if contacts are rare and infrequent, children may no longer recognize their own (biological) mother. This disentanglement between mothering and biology is even more noticeable among mothers who do not have, both before and during imprisonment, any form of involvement with their offspring.

Before imprisonment, six of the women interviewed had not provided continuous care for at least one of their children since they were infants, and so had not maintained regular

contact with them. When these mothers are imprisoned, their involvement with their offspring generally does not suffer significant changes. While in prison, the intermittent and restricted contact mothers previously had with their children is perpetuated and may become even more severe since women are physically removed from the community context. In these specific situations, imprisonment is not the factor that strains the relationship between the mothers and their offspring, or even the one that causes separation (Granja, Cunha & Machado, 2013).

Despite the scant involvement that these women have with their children, prison experience can, to some extent, by sheltering individuals from the cumulative pressures of everyday survival, allow prisoners to reflect upon their past absences. This may promote new subjective responses through which parents revalidate previous experiences of parenting (Cunha & Granja, 2013). Andreia, aged 52, is a recidivist offender convicted for theft with a sentence of 5 years and 6 months. She has not maintained regular contact with her two children for the last thirteen years. Her narrative highlights the tensions, inconsistencies and ambiguities arising from her role as mother. On the one hand, Andreia believes that her previous and current absences in her children's life do not allow her to be a "good mother". On the other hand, she conveys the idea that her emotional connection with her children is not conditional upon her presence. Andreia highlights mothers' irreplaceability by praising and claiming the importance of her biological bond with her offspring.

*I wasn't a good mother (...) because I was never a permanent mother. (...) For God sake, my children are sad about their mother! And they are right! I'm a mother and I can feel and imagine my children in every situation. It's not just because they do not lack things [money, house conditions] that this is easy for them. And the mother? They have their father, grandmother and stepmother but I mean, and the mother? Nobody*

*replaces the mother. Nobody! And I know they love me. But I failed a lot with them.*

*And it hurts.*

Mothers' perceptions of dysfunctionality and guilt *vis-à-vis* the parenting ideal are compounded by an "ideology of blame" stemming from the current social construct of parenting. Turning parents, and especially women, into the sole parties responsible for the children's well being and development implies holding them accountable – i.e., blamed – for their children's underachievement. Generally, non-prisoner mothers and fathers reinforce (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2011) or actively resist these dominant discourses (Holt, 2010). In this study, imprisoned mothers tend to reproduce, though embedded in ambiguities and tensions, these notions conveyed by intensive mothering ideologies. That is, prisoners generally perceive children's misconduct as a reflection of their imprisonment. Rosa, aged 41, has two children. She is a first time offender sentenced to 5 years for threat. Rosa thinks that the reason underlying her daughter's dropping out of school and general lack of future prospects is her own imprisonment.

*I think my daughter's life has changed a lot since my imprisonment. I know that if this had not happened she would still be in school. My imprisonment is the reason why she interrupted her studies at 15 years old (...) she began to constantly miss classes and staying at home. (...) [Nowadays] I don't see my daughter with clear objectives in life. (...)I think she's waiting for me to leave prison to re-start her life.*

Most interviewed women blame themselves for the behaviour of their children, which they understand as a result of their own shortcomings in their mothering performance. Mothers tend to assume as their own fault their offspring's conduct, even though it might be caused, or at least exacerbated, by societal forces that had not been taken into consideration (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2011).



These narratives of self-blame are supported and consolidated not only by popular ideas about child care but also by expert literature that adopts perspectives which emphasise infants' dependence on mothers and the detrimental implications of separation (Nicolson, 1993: 205). In this literature, research that explores the impact of parental incarceration on children's well being stands out. These studies favour an approach that mainly stresses the negative or "criminogenic" effects of imprisonment (Sampson, 2011: 819). Assuming that parental absence triggers a series of adverse consequences for children's behaviour and living conditions, this research highlights factors such as economic hardship, social ostracism, deterioration of parental relationship and development of deviant behaviours, as outcomes stemming from parental imprisonment (for a literature review see Hairston, 2007).

However, despite the prevalence of research seeking to unravel the connections between parental offending behaviour, imprisonment and child problems, a clear causal relationship was never established (Hairston, 2007: 21). On the contrary, studies have shown that incarceration is part of a complex set of social and family issues among various other forms of social exclusion and marginalisation that affect the lives of disadvantaged children. In other words, the mother's imprisonment is more a corollary of pre-existing problems in children's lives than their sole cause (Hissel, Bijleveld, & Kruttschnitt, 2011: 358).

### ***Vulnerable Resistance Strategies***

Facing imposed separation from their children, and incorporating the social construct of what it means to be a "good mother" (Enos, 2001: 108), women in prison tend to reproduce, by their own representations and actions, dominant cultural notions about parenting that cast them as unfit to perform their roles as mothers. However, the reproduction of these conventional norms is embedded in tensions, inconsistencies, contradictions and ambiguities. Despite feeling unable to measure up to hegemonic ideologies, prisoners enact

resistance to the penal policies undermining their mothering roles. By circumventing institutional restraints, imprisoned mothers attempt to preserve a significant role in children's lives.

In prison, imposed separation from children implies that prisoners' contact with their offspring is mediated by external carers. The maternal relationship thus extends beyond the mother-child dyad (Martin, 2007: 7), involving complex emotional dynamics among substitute care providers, mothers, and children. In order to be involved with their offspring, mothers need strategically to manage co-ordinated care, engaging in a constant negotiation between their role and that of the carers. That is, on the one hand, mothers need to allow carers to have some autonomy in handling their children's lives, mainly to solve everyday issues. On the other hand, prisoners claim they must retain their role as the primary person responsible for their children, continuing to play a central role in decisions about child behaviour, education, and discipline. Despite the fact that most mothers generally assess the carer's role positively, that is, they consider that their children's well being is being safeguarded, they intend to protect their role in order to resume it after imprisonment. Carla, aged 47, is a recidivist offender sentenced to five years for fraud. She has two children. Her youngest daughter is in the care of her mother and an adult niece. Carla describes a quarrel she had when her niece hit her daughter, thus asserting Carla's ideas about child raising, over the ones of the carer.

*My niece is very strict with my daughter; I understand she has to be like that sometimes, but not excessively like one time when she hit my daughter. And I had an argument with her "I won't allow you or anyone else to hit my daughter!", and there was a disagreement between us.*

The negotiation and co-ordination between mothers and carers are entirely dependent on harmonious relationships. Managing mothering from prison implies a very fragile balance

between absence and presence, which can easily involve divergence between the mothers' view of their rights and responsibilities, and the perceptions of carers about their own role, since boundaries between them are blurred. If the relationship between carers and mothers deteriorates during the course of imprisonment, it can adversely impact on mother-child involvement. When prisoners and substitute care providers maintain strained relations, carers are generally unwilling to promote mother-child contact, and may act as gatekeepers, restricting or precluding mothers' access to children (Granja, Cunha, & Machado, 2013).

Conversely, when harmonious relationships are maintained, carers are usually one of the most valuable resources for mothers. They play a crucial role in fostering and facilitating involvement with children and supporting the prisoners' strategies to uphold their role as mothers. Cláudia, aged 35, has one daughter and is a recidivist offender serving a sentence of 4 years and 8 months for drug trafficking. Despite her physical absence in her daughter's life, Cláudia explains how her child's guardians try, to the greatest possible extent, to include her in both ordinary and relevant decisions regarding her daughter.

*I'm imprisoned but nothing is done to my daughter without my consent. Unfortunately, I'm imprisoned but the first person [to authorize or not] all my child's requests is me. (...) One of these days, I wrote to social security to help move her from her current school. I'm always present. The only absence is my body, but I do all I can from here to help my daughter. Moreover, I was in school [attending school activities during imprisonment] receiving 150€ per month, and as soon as the money was in my account I would send it outside for my daughter.*

Cláudia strives to participate actively in her daughter's life, defining limits of leisure time, addressing school issues, sending money to carers, and constantly reaffirming her primary role. In doing so, this prisoner reproduces for herself the notion of a mother as omnipotent regardless of the circumstances she faces, minimising the importance of imposed

separation and prison monitoring. However, in order to accomplish this array of strategies and maintain, at least partially, some of her previous roles, Cláudia is dependent on the carers' willingness to support her connection with her daughter, and on the availability of her own economic resources within prison. The scarce financial support that some imprisoned mothers are able to provide to children through their earnings is highly variable. Prisoners' funds are dependent on the access they might have to payment for working time in school and labour programs that are implemented in prison, and to payment for work related to other activities in which prisoners take part. When Cláudia was interviewed she was no longer able to provide even a small amount of money to her daughter on a monthly basis.

Besides sharing responsibilities with carers, mothers are also deeply engaged in strengthening a connection with their children. To ensure this link, prisoners resort to visits, phone calls and letters . During these opportunities, prisoners tend to reserve periods of exclusive devotion to children in order to provide them with advice that seeks to encourage good behaviour and to talk with their offspring about their lives and concerns. Maria Luísa, aged 44, a first time offender sentenced to 5 years for fraud, talks about her visits with her only son:

*On Saturdays, my son and my father always come here to visit me. My father always leaves earlier because he respects our privacy [mother and child] and because my son wants to talk with me. My son talks to me openly about everything. (...) Drugs are my main concern out there regarding him. (...) I always try to transmit to my kid "Nuno you have to beware".*

Mothers also try to expand the few possibilities to connect with children in innovative ways. Antónia, aged 42, a first time offender convicted to 25 years for attempted murder, has six children, four of whom are minors. Upon her imprisonment, she left her children in the care of her parents, who have a low level of education. In order to keep up with her children's

performance in school and help them, Antónia adapted her handwriting so they would be able to understand it.

*The only way that I had to make up for my absence was through visiting, letters and phone calls. I always wrote to my children, always helped them with whatever they needed (...) My parents don't know how to write or read, then all the support I could provide for my children was through letters. I had to change my handwriting, in order to be able to write that type of primary script for them to understand what I was writing.*

Although Antónia is committed to staying connected to her children, the lack of economic resources often prevents her from seeing them. Although she is able to bear the costs of telephone calls and correspondence, the distance between prison facilities and the family home, as well as the travel costs, are frequently factors that deter prison visits. At the time of the interview Antónia saw her children only during home leaves. In the mean time, she resorted to telephone calls and letters as the main forms of contact.

Women's narratives highlight their determination and creatively negotiation in circumventing and managing imposed constraints created by prison monitoring. Nevertheless, imprisoned mothers also illustrate how their plans to remain engaged with children are unreliable. These strategies are conditioned by several volatile factors, mainly beyond the women's control, that range from prison restrictions, to negotiations with carers and scarce economic resources.

## **Conclusion**

Imprisonment is a scenario marked by mothers' physical absence in their children's lives, the lack of social and economic resources for most prisoners and the institutional settings that place primary emphasis on punishment and control, over family ties (Ferraro,

Johson, Jorgensen, & Bolton, 1983; Radelet, Vandiver, & Berardo, 1983: 606; Touraut, 2012). Therefore, within the framework of “intensive parenting” ideologies, mothering from prison provides a privileged “social laboratory” to explore how mothering is enacted by disadvantaged and criminalized women in a context removed from traditional caring settings.

Mothering from prison calls into question some conventional assumptions about parenting (Enos, 2001; Palomar, 2007). It disentangles the concepts of caring work (care for) and love (care about) and challenges the “biologization” of the mothering role. Thus, mothering in the interface between prison and the outside reflects both the diversity in mothering’ experiences and the role of other kin in caretaking, outlining the interchangeability of the provider of care (for a related topic see also Silva, 1996: 2).

Prisoners’ narratives highlight the complexity underpinning their maternal performances. Imprisoned mothers strive to resist the penal policies that undermine their primary role in children’s lives. However, resistance is vulnerable and fragile because it is pervaded with tensions, inconsistencies and ambiguities.

Women’s sense of responsibility towards their children, inculcated by dominant ideologies, puts prisoners under pressure to be “good mothers” in a context that undermines most of their efforts. Prevented from measuring up to hegemonic ideologies, women feel guilty and dysfunctional about what they perceive as shortcomings in their mothering performance. Imprisoned mothers tend to internalize the punishment *ethos* of prison and hold themselves responsible for their children’s behaviour.

However, while reproducing dominant assumptions that cast them as unfit to perform their roles as mothers, imprisoned mothers simultaneously reject a peripheral and fragmentary role in their children’s lives. Women strive to carry on mothering on their own terms, reproducing the notion of parents as omnipotent. By claiming their primary role in child rearing, trying to participate actively in their children’s everyday routines, providing for

them economically and fuelling an emotional connection with their offspring, prisoners constantly struggle to uphold their role as mothers.

In this sense, *vulnerable resistance* can be seen as a creative negotiation by which this particular group of underprivileged and criminalised women creates a space within which they can define themselves as “good mothers” (see also McCormack, 2005).

Besides the contradictions and ambiguities underpinning women’s accounts of mothering, another dimension of *vulnerable resistance* is its dependence on a myriad of volatile factors, mainly beyond prisoners’ control. Women’s ability to resist is dependent on the carers’ willingness to support the relationship between mother and children, is conditional upon the access to economic and social capital inside and outside prison, and is highly limited by an environment that imposes several institutional constraints on how mothering is exercised.

The implications of this study for policy and practice are necessarily restricted due to the limited generalizability of research findings.

In broad terms this study highlights the need to explore critically how to attribute rights and responsibilities to more socially vulnerable mothers facing cumulative segregation processes within and beyond prison. In particular, it points to the need to do so without further risking pressuring or stigmatising specific groups of women.

As far as the prison context is concerned, there is scope to facilitate mothers’ involvement with children, by creating institutional mechanisms that specifically address these issues. In addition to promoting policies that favour direct mother-child contact – through visits and phone calls –, it is possible to create instruments that allow women to maintain, to some extent, some of the meaningful roles they previously enacted (such as economic provision, educational encouragement, and guidance), thus avoiding abrupt disruptions of their performance. Enhancing the mother’s involvement must not, however,

overburden children or their carers. Prisoner's relatives and kinship networks commonly face difficult situations which must not be accentuated by new penal policies.

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<sup>i</sup> The term “discourse” is used throughout the text as a reference to the disciplinary knowledge constituted around parenting. That is, we use the term discourse not to refer to discourse analysis of prisoner’s narratives but in terms of how hegemonic ideologies around parenting - underlying claims to scientific knowledge - are related and embedded in power relations, in the specific sense attributed by Foucault (1972), as “power-knowledge”. Therefore, discourses are here understood within the wider social processes of legitimating power, as an embodiment of a complex of ideas, beliefs, representations, attitudes and practices that carry a host of power relations.

<sup>ii</sup> The permissible age limit for children to live in the institution with their parents is three years old, with the possible exception of five year old children if the following conditions are met: authorisation of another holder of parental responsibility is provided; staying in prison is considered to be in the child’s best interest; there are the required facilities. For recent general regulations see Regulamento Geral dos Estabelecimentos Prisionais Decreto-Lei n.º 51/2011 <http://dre.pt/pdf1sdip/2011/04/07100/0218002225.pdf>. [General Regulation for the Prisons in Portugal, Decree-Law no. 51/2011].

<sup>iii</sup> Roma, a highly stigmatised and widely dispersed ethnic group, is the designation adopted by Roma activists and some members of the Roma community. However, the majority of members of this community in Portugal use the ethnonym “Gypsy” (*cigano/a*) to identify themselves.

<sup>iv</sup> Higher than the Portuguese Total Fertility Rate. The latest data from 2012 indicates 1.28 children per woman (see Por Data <http://www.pordata.pt/Portugal>).

<sup>v</sup> Twenty-five years is the maximum prison sentence in Portugal.

<sup>vi</sup> Stamps and telephone cards must be purchased by prisoners and/or their relatives. Visits’ related costs – transport and food – are also supported by kinship networks.