Care and Respect

Mothing and Relatedness in Multigenerational Prison Settings

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IN PORTUGAL, as in many other countries, prisons are gendered institutions. Men and women are incarcerated in different institutions and separate prison buildings. Further, prisons are shaped by gender ideologies and enhance gender asymmetries (Cunha 1994, 2007; Cunha and Granja). Parenting is one of the aspects in which such disparities become most salient. When the choice to allow infant children to stay with the imprisoned parent is afforded by prison institutions, it is typically available only in female prisons.

Parenting is generally a more critical issue for female inmates than male inmates. While male and female prisoners may both be parents, it is more likely that mothers were the primary caregivers of children prior to their incarceration (e.g. Greene, Haney and Hurdado; La Vigne, Brooks and Shollenberger). This is especially true because, in many cases, fathers were already imprisoned or were absentee parents (Henriques; Greene, Haney and Hurdado); parenting is a source of increased concern and responsibility for mothers upon their imprisonment.

Incarcerated mothers face many challenges when seeking to maintain their relationships with their children. Besides trying to ensure their children's presence and maintain a sense of personal connection, they face challenges including the difficulty of travel, separation and contact (Cubulceda and Guerriero). Incarcerated mothers may also remain engaged and actively involved in their children's lives. It is important to note that the children's experiences can also affect the mothers, as they continue to provide support and guidance through self-help groups and peer support networks.

One of the effects of mass imprisonment has been the co-incarceration of relatives of multiple generations (Cunha 2002). In-prison relationships between mothers and their offspring may include children as well as adults—an aspect that has received little attention in the literature (but see Cunha forthcoming) and which raises additional issues regarding confined mothering and motherhood.

This paper draws on fieldwork conducted at different periods over the course of three decades, in two Portuguese carceral settings located in the main metropolitan areas of the country: Estabelecimento Prisional de Tires (hereafter Tires) and Estabelecimento Prisional de Santa Cruz do Bispo (hereafter...
Santa Cruz). The first was created in 1954 in the outskirts of Lisbon and is still today the major female penal institution in the country; the second opened in 2005 near the northern city of Oporto.

Although these two penitentiaries are intended to serve a similar type of penal population, the contrast between their different historical origin and regional location allow for a more controlled grasp of regularities and variations between them and for an overall perspective regarding the aspects we set to approach in this paper.

Fieldwork in Tires was conducted in two periods separated by a decade, of two and one year respectively (1987-1989; 1997). This fieldwork achieved unrestricted access to all prison facilities. Besides conducting seventy in-depth interviews, the fieldwork allowed for the observation and participation in most prison activities and daily life (which included those of mothers with children behind bars), as well as for engaging in informal individual and group conversations with prisoners on a regular basis and under varied circumstances. The six-month fieldwork in Santa Cruz during 2011 consisted of ethnographic observations centered mainly on prison visits (especially family members) and in-depth interviews with 20 incarcerated women.

Tires' imprisoned population, which in 1997 reached 823 prisoners, had evolved towards a striking social and penal homogeneity in the span of only a decade. In 1997, 76 percent of women were imprisoned for drug trafficking compared to 37 percent ten years earlier, and property offenders represented no more than 13 percent. The majority of those convicted (69 percent) were serving sentences of more than five years. Prisoners increasingly came from segments of the working class and reflected the most deprived of economic and educational capital.

From 1987 to 1997, the proportion of women who held jobs in the bottom tier of the service economy rose from 4 percent to 33 percent, and the proportion who had never attended school or gone beyond the fourth grade rose from 47 percent to 9 percent. In Santa Cruz this proportion climbed to 67 percent today. This prison has an average population of 265 inmates between convicts and detainees. Most were imprisoned for drug trafficking (62 percent) and most of those convicted for more than one year (91 percent) were serving sentences of more than six years.

Santa Cruz thus approximately reproduces the pattern in Tires, albeit more mitigated in some respects, including the fact that an important proportion of prisoners have relatives imprisoned in the same institution or in other prison facilities. Circles of co-confined kin in the same institution can be quite large (reaching up to more than a dozen people) and may extend to three or four generations (when a great-grandson is born in prison to a prisoner whose daughter and grand-daughter are also behind bars).

CONTROLLING MOTHERHOOD, INSTITUTIONALIZED RELATEDNESS

When Tires opened in mid-twentieth century, during the Portuguese Estado Novo dictatorship (1933-1974), the program for the "moral regeneration" of delinquent women drew heavily on dominant gender ideologies (Cunha 1994). While they were considered "double deviants" in Portugal—both as members of society and of their gender—the purpose of rehabilitating them through domesticity and motherhood was perfectly aligned with a State ideology that presented women as the nation's ultimate moral base. It emphasized women's dedicated performance as wives and mothers as the only route for women's participation in the collective destiny (see Belezas dos Santos; Salazar). In prison, one of the treatment program's ingredients consisted of an attempt to instill feelings of maternal responsibility in inmates and cultivate their mothering skills. Although granting permission to keep infant children in prison took the children's interests into account, it was primarily justified by the program's goal to educate the mothers. Aiming at the "social promotion of the delinquent woman," it was determined that "offspring, in the case of infants, should remain with the mothers so as to maintain and promote their sense of natural responsibilities" (Pinto 56). Prison regulations also explicitly stipulated that prisoners should be taught to attend to their infant children inside the institution and children should spend time with their mothers daily, as well (Correia 279).

The focus on domesticity and reproduction would linger, albeit attenuated, long after the democratic revolution in 1974 and the geography of gender would continue to determine the prison regime. Explicit gendered moral considerations have long since been expunged from official regulations, and the focus of such arrangements has shifted from the moral regeneration of the prisoners (leading them into proper motherhood) to accommodating the child's interest. Otherwise, they have remained stable over time in their general principles: namely, the age limit for children allowed to live in the institution with their mothers (three years-old, exceptionally five); the provision of a day nursery, within the prison compound but physically separated from prison blocks, where children remain during mothers' working hours, and where they are attended by trained personnel; and a prison wing that houses prisoners with children behind bars together. These elements are common to both prisons considered here.

Gender considerations involving parenting and the mother role nevertheless did not disappear from prison daily life. They remained infused in informal institutional practices and interactions. Mothers may, for example, be assigned to assist day care staff in an attempt to improve their mothering skills or by way of discouraging them to leave their children in the nursery too prematurely. A Tires prison warden said, reproachfully:
There are some mothers who want to get rid of the children and be as little as possible with them. It’s I who has to force them to stay with the children in their cells when they are still babies, otherwise they would put them in daycare.

Besides criticizing mothers for being too impatient or not caring enough for their children, prison guards also intervene directly. Prisoners confined to the mothers wing feel that they are the object of constant additional control. Attempts to socialize with prisoners from other wings (e.g. by making up errands to the prison shop) may be immediately curtailed by warnings that they must go back to attending to their children. Guards are more rigorous over the hygiene and tidiness of these prisoners’ cells (“we have to check and warn them all the time because kids take everything within reach to their mouths and there are irresponsible mothers”). Guards also admonish mothers if they deem a child’s hygiene is being neglected or his feeding inadequate; they may punish prisoners for shouting too much at their infants.

The inmates in question deeply resent these interventions as they arguably challenge their self-representation as mothers. They are especially adamant in repudiating them as intrusions in a domain perceived as indisputably their own: “Guards should stay out of this, these are my children, not theirs!” In their eyes, the role of mother supersedes that of inmate and should remain out of range of guards’ authority. Paradoxically, it is precisely in the name idealized notions of motherhood (and of the importance of being a “good mother”) that co-inmates approve guards’ interference: “The guards have every right to interfere; they have to educate them to be good mothers.”

Prisoners are aware that their inmate and motherly conditions are somehow merged and some even suspect that their performance as mothers is assessed in the same way as their behaviour as prisoners—that is, with the potential to impact parole board deliberations. In any case, they sense all too well that the in-prison relationship with their offspring and the language of care itself are inescapably intertwined in the coercive management of the “total institution” (Goffman). They also realize that children themselves, as they become socialized in prison routines, internalize their mothers’ subject position within the institution, in which mothers may also be solded like children. Antónia, a 42-year-old inmate arrested for attempted murder, said: “My son knew. If the door opened and I hadn’t dressed [in the prison uniform] he reminded me right away: ‘Mother, put it on, otherwise Mrs. Guard is going to sold you’!”

In recent decades, with the co-imprisonment of mothers and adult daughters (and sometimes granddaughters), such encompassment by the institutional coercive framework has become more extensive. Notions of care are intertwined in a complex way with respect. There is a prevalent ideal regarding family con-

duct, the criteria that should regulate relationships between children, parents and grandparents, and appropriate levels of intimacy, responsibility, support, and moral obligation among family members (Cunha 2002; Cunha forthcoming). A 56-year-old prisoner and mother of six—who at the time shared her cell with her 25-year-old daughter and whose husband and another son were serving time in a male prison facility—expressed this close connection between care and respect:

I brought up my children honourably. I always fed them, never abandoned them, never put them in an institution. I was always a good mother and I never had a man to help me. Respect was what I gave them. They all respected me... [In the meantime, her adult daughter arrives in the cell]. Come on Rosa, say hello. Sorry, nowadays they just want to fool around, but they respect me. Just because I’m in prison, does that mean they shouldn’t respect me?

She then went on to complain about her sons’ lack of reciprocity. They didn’t respect their parents and neglected to visit and support them in prison. Failure to fulfill familial and supportive obligations elicits depreciative comments that denounce respectful behaviour. For example, a prisoner convicted for drug trafficking greeted an elderly woman passing by with:

Her daughters were real cows to her... They don’t have any respect for her. No respect at all. It’s not because someone is in jail that they should lose respect. She’s also got her grandson here, poor thing. The grandmother’s the only one of them worth anything because the mother is a bitch to that child. The grandmother comes between them, which is just as well.

Respect implicitly demands a hierarchical aspect to it. Imprisonment destabilises this as daughters, mothers and grandmothers are reduced to a common condition—that of a prisoner. Tiarades such as: “You’re as much a prisoner as I am, it’s the guards who tell me what to do!” were not uncommon from daughters exasperated by older relatives’ control over their behaviour. The levelling effect of being imprisoned and the resulting equalization of once hierarchical familial positions dims that authority. Respect is nevertheless an ingredient of prison sociality between mothers and daughters, and guards sometimes use its language as a valuable tool in their work:

The mothers do a lot of controlling and that makes the work of the guards much easier. There’s a prisoner here who is completely unbearable when her mother is not around. When her mother comes, she shows respect and
Such forms of relatedness may also occur between non-relatives, especially in the mothers' prison wing. Inmates' sociality in this wing has a distinct quality. Children are at its forefront. Besides the fact that mothers' spare time is largely absorbed by child care (feeding their children, bathing them, washing their clothes, playing with them, watching over them), all inmates have a more or less collective relationship with the kids in the wing. They give them affectionate nicknames, comment on their progress and achievements, protect them when the respective mothers snap at them (even physically threatened the mother of a child to whom she had become particularly attached). They help feed them, take them to the playground or for a walk when the mother is reminded in the cell, and take charge of them when the child's mother goes to court. Prisoners allowed to go on (home) leave sometimes collect children of imprisoned relatives or friends and look after them in their homes during those periods. They offer advice to co-inmates on their children's health issues and sometimes urge them to take the children to the doctor without delay when a child appears ill or injured. They share food, clothing and children items. Inmate mothers who do not share are loathed more than informers.

Unlike in other wings, sociality is strongly mediated by the presence of children, both in instances of solidarity (we help each other out because of the kids) as well as of conflict. When a child is sick, all inmates may knock simultaneously on their door cells in order to alert the guards or to demand that the cell in question is opened.

RESIGNIFYING AND REIFYING MOTHERHOOD

Some mothers express ambivalence about keeping their infant children with them behind bars. They express concern about the effects of prison limitations and the environment on children: the noise and the inmate fighting, the oppressive prison bars, locks and keys, cell confinement, and the lack of exposure to the outside world.

I couldn't bear the sight of her confined in a tiny space, asking me to open the door. Then I said no: it is me who is supposed to suffer, not the kid. I had to send her away. I regretted keeping him here when I went out with him on temporary leave. He had never seen a street before, he was scared of the cars.

Out of guilt, some of these mothers renounce keeping their children in prison; others, usually middle-class prisoners, decide on principle not to bring them from the start, deeming it would be harmful to the child and selfish on their part. However, this is not always an option, especially for less better-off inmates, who are the ones most affected by the consequences of mass...
incarceration and by the co-imprisonment of relatives. Like Ana, an inmate who has her baby daughter with her and left a one-year-old child to the care of her mother, mothers may decide to keep children behind bars in order not to overburden relatives: "If I could, I would send her away" [but no else in the family could bear another burden].

Otherwise, as illustrated by the following short excerpts, mothers’ narratives commonly emphasize a recurrent theme: their children’s presence fulfills them, helps them cope and softens their prison experience (Cunha 1994: 156, Serra and Pires 420).

The best thing here is that they let us keep our children with us. Time passes more quickly. There’s no time to get depressed, it makes me react. I don’t take sleeping pills. My tranquilizers are my children. Those who don’t have their kids here are mentally upset. The company they keep makes up for all the chores and all the trouble in the world. I only feel lonely at night, when they go to sleep and I start thinking. This would be heavy without the children. When my son is in daycare I don’t know what to do, I’m longing for him to come back. I’m always looking forward to the weekends, so that I can be with my daughter all day long. If I could have all my children with me, I wouldn’t mind to be in prison. They provide an escape, they give us strength to hold on.

These narratives almost always express a highly idealized maternal self-image that does not necessarily match the actual interactions between mothers and their offspring. Likewise, there are claims by co-inmates who proudly suggest that it was under their influence that mothers actually started to enjoy their children and learned how to care for them: “Before she didn’t care, now she even says ‘Oh my Chico is so pretty, isn’t he?'” Prisoners who admitted that at some point or another they had “no patience” for their children or that their presence in such an environment could also be overbearing (“the kids altogether, it’s a racket. We can do nothing but run after them, stopping fights”) were rare exceptions. Rosy narratives may be even more prevalent in inmates’ recollections whose children have already left prison, insofar as only the gratifying moments are remembered. Separation itself, whether during the prison sentence or upon imprisonment, allows for re-imagining mother-child relationships in a positive light.

Yet, as Cristina Palomar Verea (372) has also noted, by taking some of the burdens away from women’s day-to-day lives the prison environment does allow for experiencing motherhood in new ways. Sheltered from the pressures of everyday survival, poverty and violence, with time available to dedicate to their children (who now also receive specialized medical and psychological attention), and with consistent exposure to expert educational and pedagogical discourses and programs, mothers may experience an unprecedented and intense bond with their children. This creates new subjectivities in which motherhood takes centre stage, and through which mothers also resignify previous experiences of motherhood. In such a context, motherhood becomes hyperbolized in narratives of personal identity, including the way it is perceived in retrospect or projected into the future.

FINAL REMARKS

Children and a mother’s separation from her children is at the top of the “pains of imprisonment.” These are pervasive themes of prison discussion. Motherhood is recurrently invoked by inmates as a motive and justification for the offence that led them to prison (I did it for my children; I had to feed my kids). Reference to motherhood is thus often a gendered “technique of neutralization” (Sykes and Matza). Furthermore, the discursive importance of the “good mother” may be instrumental in refusing a “deviant” identity and may be invoked as a synonym of a “good citizen” (Cunha 1994).

However, contextual variations caution us against presuming that motherhood predetermines women’s whole identity in incarceration situations. As a gendered anchor of a “non-deviant” social identity, motherhood was more central during the 1980s. Since the 1990s, a new sense of collective identity and shared destiny have emerged; these have been based on prisoners’ common provenance from the same destitute and ill-reputed urban areas, as well as on kin, friendship, and neighbourhood ties, and on a shared position at the bottom of the class structure—what included, for the first time, an endured sense of collective stigma (see Cunha 2002).

Overshadowed by new categories of agency and identity within which prisoners came to react to their common marginalization, identity dimensions such as gender receded to the backstage of the prison social scene. This was also complicated by mass incarceration and the co-imprisonment of relatives. The sociography of relatedness, as well as the “ethics of care,” once identified with women who mothers, are not limited to mother-child dyads anymore, but involve wider circles of relationships; furthermore, as it simultaneously involves more than two generations, the ethics of care is enmeshed in a more (even if not altogether) gender-neutral ethics of respect, reciprocity, and moral obligation.

The prison environments discussed here focused on reproduction and on the mother-child bond (a notion also formatted by expert discourses and popular psychology) and this promotes a highly idealized and essentialized notion of motherhood. This ideal construct of motherhood is disconnected from the harsh realities and actual experiences of these women’s lives. In many cases, it is behind bars that these mothers find the time, structure or the
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Although such possibility is not necessarily barred to inmate fathers by prison regulations such as the Portuguese’s (which today may not even specify gender), logistical and practical conditions hardly allow for its implementation (e.g. there are generally no daycare centres in male institutions). See Wall and Lobo for the growing importance of single parents’ households in Portugal.

For example, through tattoos, photographs, letters and stories (Ferraro and Moe; Clark).

In Portugal the co-imprisonment of kin, as well as the presence of multiple neighbours and previous acquaintances doing time in the same prison facilities, has to do with the systematic provenance of prison populations from a handful of poverty-stricken urban territories in the two main Portuguese metropolitan areas (Lisbon and Oporto). Since the 1990s, these neighbourhoods were associated with a booming petty drug economy and drew an intense attention from law enforcement agencies and the criminal justice system, which increased the probabilities of detention (for a more detailed explanation see Cunha 2005, 2008). The latter (Santa Cruz) even came to absorb, upon its opening, part of the prisoners of the former (Tires), which was overcrowded then.

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Women were selected by combining a snowball progression that followed ‘natural’ networks and a systematic sampling that diversified inmates along lines of penal and social profile, as well as length and experience of confinement (Cunha 1994, 2002).

In the case of Tires, according to a conservative estimate based on data registered in social-educational files, between one-half and two-thirds of the inmates in Tires had family members inside the same institution (sisters, cousins, aunts, nieces, mothers, grandmothers). This estimate does not include male partners and kin serving their own sentences in other facilities. In Santa Cruz, on the
This point is developed in Cunha and Granja.

See also Young (148-158) for a related point.

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Incarcerated Indigenous Australian Mothers

Maintaining Patriarchal Colonization

RUTH MCCAUSSLAND AND EILEEN BALKRY

INDIGENOUS WOMEN have been the fastest growing group of prisoners in Australia for the past decade. Indigenous women, making up only two percent of the Australian women’s population now make up 30 percent of women in prison. Most Indigenous women prisoners have children and most of them have their children removed. Indigenous women have specific experiences based on the intersection of their race and gender (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner; Wirringa Baiya Aboriginal Women’s Legal Centre). For example, Indigenous women experience high levels of family and community violence but are under-represented in formal reporting of such abuse, arguably due to their experience of racism in the criminal justice system (Wirringa Baiya Aboriginal Women’s Legal Centre). Intersectional and institutional discrimination manifest in government policies and programs for women and for Indigenous peoples generally. These policies do not respond to the specific circumstances of Indigenous women who are, on the whole, invisible in the Australian political environment (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner).

In this chapter we argue that the contemporary over-representation of Indigenous women in prison cannot be understood in isolation from Australia’s history of colonial, paternalistic control of them and their children, and the consequent failure to allow them agency and participation in decision-making regarding matters affecting them, their families and communities. The historical characterisation and treatment of Aboriginal women has direct and real consequences today in the policy failure to support positive change in their lives. We also explore and reflect upon the views of and about incarcerated Indigenous mothers. Then, we analyze the policies and practices shaping their lives, choices and relationships. We argue that the over-representation of Indigenous women in prison is a contemporary manifestation of the two centuries old colonial patriarchal impetus to control Indigenous Australian women and their children.