

Women, prisons, and freedom: experiences of former female inmates from the prison system in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil

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Abstract *This article analyzes vulnerabilities and prospects of restructuring the lives of women who experienced maternity in prison. This qualitative study was performed with a thematic analysis of the reports of women released from the prison system who experienced pregnancy and delivery in a female penitentiary in a Southern Brazilian capital. Three thematic categories were identified: “Between rupture and freedom”, a category focused on the description of moments before the borderline date for the child’s stay with the mother in prison, which produces great expectations due to the possibility of women managing to get out of prison along with their child; “Freedom is right there”, which narrates leaving prison and the first social contacts outside this environment; and “Inmate in daily life”, which addresses the difficulties resulting from social exclusion that women were already facing before imprisonment, that is, having the minimum conditions to keep away from the crime dynamics. Leaving the prison system does not necessarily mean freedom. The “identity crossroads” keep following women and their children even after leaving prison. Therefore, vulnerability manifests itself in the same way or more cruelly than before.*

Key words *Women, Prisons, Social Isolation, Health Vulnerability*

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Introduction

The situation of women who experience motherhood in prison has been a permanent focus of analysis in human rights so that minimum criteria for protecting their dignity, that of their children, and their families are respected. Analyses about this condition, with increasing dialogue between the health sector and the justice system, have raised questions about the legality of the imprisonment of women in pregnancy and postpartum situations¹⁻³.

The adverse consequences of incarcerating these women invariably affect the lives of their children and other family members, impacting their life paths in freedom. Brazilian research⁴ on the subject highlights a context of women without a support network to ensure that their most urgent needs and those of their children are met after serving their prison sentence. Another point is the deficient access and referral of former female inmates to health and social assistance services, which peaks in the production of social vulnerabilities, with discontinuous health treatments and, ultimately, the incarceration of the population released from the prison system. As a background, this situation harbors the operability of discourses that impute social discredit to these people for being women, primarily black, and belonging to the economically poor population stratum. The stigmatization brought about by the prison experience attributed to them increases this discredit, causing deep-seated and permanent social inequalities⁵.

The reality is no different in other countries. North American research identified few opportunities for women released after conflict with the law/prison regarding social inclusion and providing services to improve health and well-being. The analyses showed a lack of articulation between the different care services, resulting in unmet mental health needs, financial restrictions, limited organizational capacity, implicit prejudice, and deficient cultural support⁶. An analysis of scientific literature and records of Australian agencies involved in the situation of these women showed that the stigma associated with having been in prison is a hindrance to transition to the community, including finding employment and housing⁷.

This paper is anchored in the framework of vulnerability and human rights⁵. It reflects on these experiences, especially on leaving prison and the return of women to their territory of life. The selected references stemmed from the

need to undertake a vulnerability analysis that would reveal individual, social and programmatic aspects involved in women's paths after imprisonment⁵. The references shed light on the conditions experienced by women released from the prison system, which expose them and their children to substandard health conditions, lack of access to social rights, and few possibilities of success in their projects for a life that encourages citizen participation in society. Considering these issues, this work gathers knowledge and reflections guided by the following objective: to analyze the vulnerabilities and perspectives of restructuring the lives of women who have experienced motherhood in prison.

Methods

This descriptive and exploratory qualitative study's setting was the home of women released from prison. Interviews were carried out with women who had been in prison in a female penitentiary's maternal and child unit in Southern Brazil. We included women who experienced pregnancy and delivery in the prison system, as mapped by the Health Secretariat of a state in southern Brazil, and excluded women who were prevented, for any reason, from receiving the researcher's visit for an interview.

Data were collected from September to December 2018 through in-depth interviews with participants from the prison system. Ten women released from the prison system were located in the data collection period, per the mapping of the State Health Secretariat. Eight were contacted by telephone and invited to participate in the research. One of these women did not accept to participate, thus totaling seven respondents.

The data collection tool consisted of questions that addressed the sociodemographic characterization and triggering questions about the experience of leaving prison after motherhood experience in prison. The researchers developed this tool after reviewing the literature and surveying points related to motherhood in the specificity of imprisonment.

The interviews were fully recorded and transcribed. The data and information obtained were processed per Minayo's⁸ thematic content analysis technique. The stages of this type of approach are pre-analysis, material exploration, and processing of the results. In the pre-analysis stage, a free-floating reading of the interviews was performed for more critical content contact.

Subsequently, we proceeded with the uptake of the meaning cores, the grouping by the affinity of shared ideas, and selected the answers to the research's central question (Figure 1). We also performed the chromatic coding of the findings and categorization of the general concepts that guided the analysis. Theoretical questions were raised to better identify the content's relevance through exhaustive reading.

The analytical framework that supported the discussion of the research findings was vulnerability and human rights⁵. It is an approach that allows analyzing situations of vulnerability in health, established in political and social settings marked by human rights violations. The macro-structural perspective is essential in studying unfavorable events in people's paths, which prevent overcoming problems through individual efforts.

Three inseparable dimensions of analysis are valued: individual, social, and programmatic. The individual dimension refers to the individual's ability, interest, and conditions to transform concerns into protected and protective practices. This action depends on the degree and quality of information individuals have about the problem and their ability to elaborate and incorporate it to become a concern effectively. The social dimension gathers some aspects of the social context of individuals' lives, which condition obtaining

the information and the possibilities of their assimilation and incorporation to produce practical changes. Some examples of these aspects are access to the media, schooling, available material resources, power to influence political decisions, the possibility of facing cultural barriers, and being free or defending oneself from violent coercion. In the programmatic dimension are the social resources – social and health actions and programs – that individuals need to prevent harm to their integrity. Concerning human rights, we observe patterns of citizenship that effectively operate in society, which increase the level and quality of commitments, resources, and management within the scope of health programs⁵.

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (CAAE: 84643518.0.0000.5347), in accordance with Resolution No. 466/2012 of the National Health Council on research with human beings. The Free and Informed Consent Term was used and, to ensure anonymity, the reports exposed in the text were identified with names of Brazilian and Latin American women eminent in the fight for women's rights.

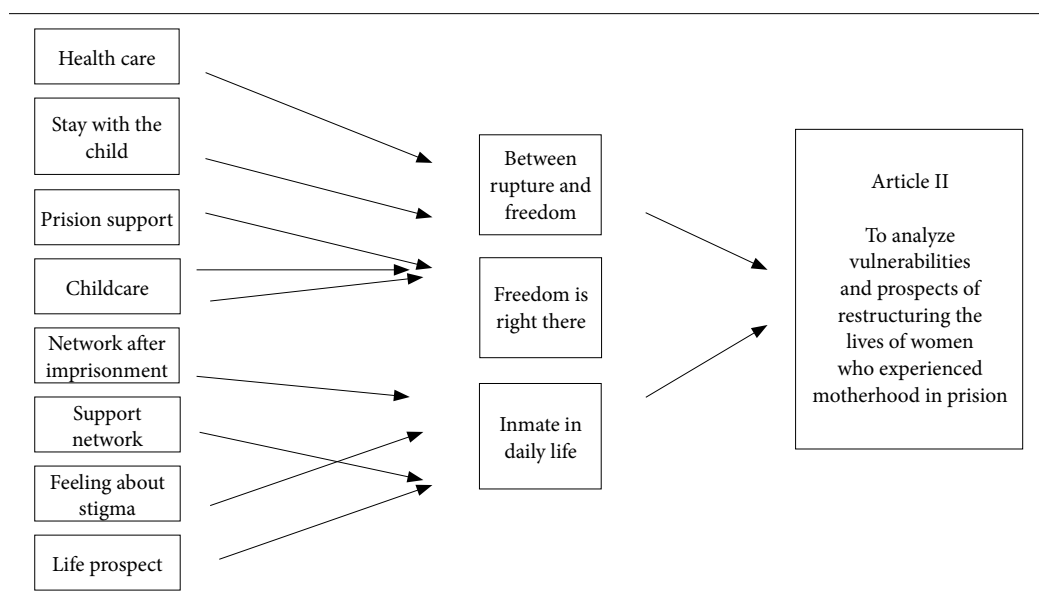


Figure 1. Meaning cores and thematic categories of research on the vulnerabilities and life perspectives of women who have experienced motherhood in prison.

Results

The empirical content used to compose the research results were the women's narratives about their experiences in the search for freedom, their paths since leaving prison, and their attempts to preserve and restructure their lives in the territories where they came to reside.

The seven women participating in this study were interviewed at their homes. Two were in a situation of liberty, and five were under house arrest – two of them with electronic monitoring (anklet). Five were self-declared black and two white in the ethnicity/skin color self-declaration. Five women had an incomplete elementary school, one had incomplete high school, and one had incomplete higher education. Four women had three or more children, and six declared they were single. Five women were arrested for drug trafficking-related crimes and two for crimes against life.

The organization of the material to survey the main topics of interest in the study led to the emergence of three empirical categories – “Between rupture and freedom”, “Freedom is right there”, “Inmate in daily life” – presented below.

Between rupture and freedom

The reports show women in prison with their children as a fact that distresses them, as they all understand that prison is not a suitable place for children to live. The focus of the reports is on the description of the moments preceding the borderline date for the child's stay with the mother in prison, which produces great expectations due to the possibility of women going out of prison together with her child.

The need to obtain from justice the merits of freedom was something that mobilized the articulation of women admitted to the maternal and child unit (of the penitentiary where they served time), arousing a collective feeling for the realization of their expectations. Waiting for freedom is seen as one of the stages most affecting the mental health of women in prison, already weakened by imprisonment, leading them to think about extreme attitudes, for example, committing violent acts:

Carolina Maria de Jesus – *She [the judge] saw that I wanted to change my life. If not, I wouldn't really accept that M. [daughter] went out alone. However, it was good. They helped me a lot; Ms. S. [psychologist] and Ms. S. [social worker] helped me. We made a petition, wrote a letter, and submitted it to the judge.*

Mariele Franco – *I took medicine and breast-fed M. [daughter]. She slept, and I fell wide asleep. I thought: I'm not even leaving and slept. I said: I don't want to eat and I don't want anything. I want to be alone. I was alone that day.*

Ivone Lara – *I was already in one of those days; you know, eight months without an answer. I had put it in my head: I either go out or don't go out anymore! If I didn't go out, I would send I. [daughter] away. I couldn't stand being there any longer. I was going to set everything on fire: I was really prepared to do that.*

The hope of going out is mixed with the anguish of going to the place of residence after obtaining freedom, which, according to the narrated situations, would represent the total lack of a support network. Some women cannot return to their homes or cities due to their involvement in trafficking:

Frida Kahlo – *It was very complicated; I had nowhere to go when I left. Mrs. S. was looking for a shelter for me, houses where refugees stay, you know, who had nowhere to stay. However, then, thank god, P. [cellmate] offered me her house here and invited me to come to live with her family. I came here; I was well received, too, thank God! I felt more protected inside, especially when I learned about this situation. I even said to Mrs. S.: Bah! I'd rather stay here than out there. Then she said: No, no, inside it's not good for you, it's outside. You have to go.*

Prison, seen as a care environment, appears to reflect the helplessness felt by some women, whether due to the breaking of family ties or the threat of being involved with the drug trafficking dynamics. These issues mobilized affections between the women and facilitated mutual reception upon their release from prison.

Freedom is right there

This category narrates the context of leaving prison and the first social contacts outside this environment. Not by chance, in almost all the interviews, this moment was referred to as the most emotional, with crying and joy. The statements illustrate the end of the respondents' suffering, who imagined that it would also be the end of their children's suffering.

In this situation, the joy of achieving freedom was mixed with the estrangement from the new reality. Crying expresses happiness and the fear of walking the streets again and experiencing situations that initially led them to prison. Some reported a new beginning due to the opportunity to

have the chance to go out with their children and resume their lives for the first time (after having already experienced their pregnancy in prison):

Carolina Maria de Jesus – *As soon as I left, I was crying, and M. was crying along, but I didn't even look back.*

Ivone Lara – *My God! You see the street up close; you see the people. It gets a little weird sometimes, you know? You look around and see no officer nearby.*

Elza Soares – *Girl, I get to choke sometimes. I had been in prison for two years and two months... not accepting that jail. So, I said: oh, I'm even scared! Totally new. I never raised my children when they were little.*

One of the women, however, regretted her freedom, as she only obtained it because one of her daughters died in delivery:

Maria da Penha – *I was hoping to leave the hospital with both of them and earn all the same. I would have preferred not to have earned anything. I wanted my daughter with me.*

The prison marks are narrated in the most different ways. References related to the difficulty of sleeping and assimilating the fact that they are no longer incarcerated are common. Some women narrate their repeated behavior in prison due to the systematic reprimands they received:

Carolina Maria de Jesus – *I couldn't sleep. I wanted to go everywhere. Then, I wanted to cook. I wanted to make everything and see everything. I woke up early in the morning screaming. It felt like I was in jail, but I wasn't.*

Ivone Lara – *We are used to having officers nearby, we are used to having a conference in the morning, we are used to going out. Like when I went to G.'s house. I stood up while she was standing. I sat when she left. Then she said: "Stop that, girl. You're not in prison anymore".*

Some statements reveal the women's total helplessness when they leave. Having remained in prison for an extended period, they suddenly find themselves alone with their children. Situations such as being without prescription glasses, which challenged their mobility outside the prison environment, or not having a place where they could spend the night were reported:

Mariele Franco – *Then I started to pack my things. However, I said, "I can't take my things. I don't even have anyone to call. I don't even have a phone number". Then the girls got together and paid my bus fare. I had been in there for so long that it seemed to me that a lot had changed; when the bus came, as I wore glasses – and I was without glasses – I looked, and I couldn't see the line*

number of the buses. I got nervous, which made the situation worse. Then I asked a girl: "Is this bus the A. (bus line)?" Then she said: "Yes". So, I embarked. Then the girl helped me with the bags: "Oh, give me the bags, and I'll help you with them. I'll stay right over there: can you see me?". So, I said: "Okay, thank you very much". So, I sat down with T. [daughter], very nervous and anxious for the bus to arrive quickly at my destination, without stops. When I arrived, another girl helped me off the bus. She took the bags for me to my uncle's house. I arrived at my uncle, hugged my aunt, and cried endlessly.

Claudia Ferreira da Silva – *My release was all right. I finally managed to get rid of it, you know. I managed to get out of it, thank God.... it looks like we won't be able to get out of there...So, I stayed there at the bus station until six o'clock in the morning. So, I stayed there because I had to go back the other day. I was going to come here in SM [local], then I would come back the other day in the morning. However, then, T. inserted his CEF card in the ATM system; the ATM system was not working, it would only operate as of six in the morning. Then I said: "It's better this way. Let's stay here". I was so happy that I didn't even care to stay there, right? We stayed at the bus station. Everything is safe: there's a guard, a brigade officer, everything...*

The moment of release from prison indicates what 'walking the world' will be like. Coming out of prison is a victory and the prelude to the onset of a new struggle to stay away from it.

Inmate in daily life

Leaving prison is resuming the struggle of women before imprisonment; in other words, having minimal conditions to stay away from the crime dynamics. Imprisonment is shown as a critical milestone that imposes new barriers to their daily lives. Using electronic monitoring anklets is the biggest one:

Carolina Maria de Jesus – *This is how the anklet works: it's 300 meters; you can't do anything without calling there; you can only go outside the 300 meters if it's to take your daughter to the hospital or if you're almost dying and must go to the hospital. So, you should have everything certified. I have a certificate of when I took M. to receive the vaccine. To move here, I had to send the papers to them. I had to go to the CRAS and several other places.*

Claudia Ferreira dos Santos – *It's hard, is it not? In this case, I am limited. I can only go out (within) three blocks.*

Those who wear anklets and can access services through home visits are satisfied and feel welcomed by the services:

Frida Kahlo – *The girls from PIM [the “Better Early Childhood” program] come here and help us a lot, you know... In what they can. We talk a lot with them; they help us the best they can... and the CRAS too. C. came here, talked to us, and got to know us, too: it was adorable to meet her.*

Women without anklets are more agile in accessing services. They talk about the poor level of resources offered by social assistance and set the church as a point of their networks:

Mariele Franco – *As soon as I left, I started running to solve things, looking for a health center. Even because of my father’s situation, I also started looking for a health center, because of T’s [daughter] vaccines, so that I could start with the visits. Then, as the staff at the center already knew me, it was straightforward, and I have yet to miss an appointment for T. I don’t miss any vaccine. So now I had some visits because I had chest pain.*

Frida Kahlo – *So, the church helps me out when I get stuck in the matter of food.*

After being imprisoned, a woman has reportedly decided to live in a city in the inland region. However, she could not avoid the effects of the stigma generated by the prison experience:

Ivone Lara – *So, I came here. A smaller town is different, and people are very prejudiced. The day I went to the pediatrician, every doctor I went to asked me repeatedly for the foot test, and they looked in the notebook there. So, I explained this to the doctor here, and she was more curious about my prison life than about taking care of the baby. My other daughter never had these problems. This is a small town; it’s good to take care of children, and there’s not much violence. We teach them not to do anything wrong. They don’t have to go through what I went through. I. [daughter] will be marked for the rest of her life; she was born in prison, and this will always emerge no matter what. When she grows up, she will always ask. It will always be this story over and over again.*

The narratives bring to light the hardly visible reality of women who come out of prison with their sons and daughters. The importance of this material is undeniable because, when understanding what happens to these people after the prison experience, especially when they need to commit to the safety of their sons and daughters, provides subsidies to face the vulnerabilities that weaken and harm their quest for an entire life for the realization of their projects.

Discussion

In the discussion of the results of this study, we are faced with the challenge of capturing, in scientific production, the feelings of women whose voices are systematically silenced because they belong to socially stigmatized population segments. The results of this research reach the most diverse levels: women who live or have lived in prison; the Judiciary; public health and social service managers; sectors involved in protecting the citizenship of women and their families.

The first point to be discussed, which outlines the situations lived by women who have experienced imprisonment, is who they are and why they are subject to prejudice and social exclusion. In November 2019, some mobilizations were observed in several Latin American countries⁹, such as the great popular uprisings that made Chile social movements effervescent. In this context, the manifestation of women who cried out:

*Patriarchy is a judge
That punishes us for being born
and our punishment
It’s the violence you don’t see...
the rapist is you
The “pacos” [militarized police]
The judges
The State
The President
The oppressive State is a male rapist.*

These manifestations and chants arise from the need to denounce violence against women, specifically sexual violence. We also identify in these demonstrations a complaint against the State, which imprisons en masse and violates women’s fundamental rights, keeping them in a state of limited opportunities for emancipation and agency in their lives.

The sociodemographic profile of the participants in this study is aligned with what other studies and reports reveal about the characteristics of Brazilian women who give birth in prisons: 70% were self-declared black, 56% were single, 48% had one to seven years schooling, and 62% were arrested for being involved in drug trafficking^{1,3,10}. The profile of the respondents shows how much the interaction between some social markers of difference – such as gender, race, and social class – drives the selectivity of people who enter the Brazilian penal system¹¹. Akotirene¹² helps us understand the intersectionality between such markers when she exposes the structural inseparability of racism, capitalism, and cisheteropa-

triarchy: “Producers of identity avenues where black women are repeatedly affected by the intersection and overlapping of gender, ethnicity, and class, modern colonial apparatus”.

Intersectionalities mean that not all women are subject to imprisonment. This statement can trigger the following reflection: “But I don’t commit crimes; how will I go to jail?”. However, this questioning is easily dispelled when one asks: How many times have you felt violated by the State? How many women in your family had access to education, housing, food, and income?

Incarceration is one of the most dramatic outcomes in the path of women who were already treading victimization routes¹³ long before this event. In this context are the harrowing experiences of women who lived motherhood in prison and are challenged by freedom. This process is analyzed by Das (apud Ortega)¹⁴ and consists of a “poisoned suffering”, considering that imprisonment is one of the most significant and decisive critical events in their lives.

Intersections of social markers of difference, such as ethnicity, class, and gender, affect women’s lives and result in vulnerabilities imbricated in different spheres of their lives. The analysis of these events anchored in the vulnerability and human rights framework⁵ allows us to understand some of the most complex processes that involve people who have experienced motherhood in the prison system.

This research shows how disadvantaged these women are in their struggle for freedom. As if it were not enough to experience motherhood in prison, they are induced to exercise perfect motherhood to obtain institutional support and protection to leave prison with their children. For these women, vulnerability is influenced individually by submission to maternity standards after undergoing a prenatal period of abandonment and violence in prison^{5,9,15}.

As for programmatic vulnerability⁵, most of these women were unduly in prison, without permanent access to adequate health care and adequate access to the public defender’s office. The lack of legal support expresses social vulnerability, as legal sentences are loaded with prejudice, stigma, racism, and machismo – structural problems that sustain a punitive and excluding logic in social dynamics.

These results dialogue with the different dimensions of vulnerability and show their inseparability. Due to its logic based on violent and abusive practices, incarceration can be considered a critical event¹⁶. Instead of being a starting point

for guaranteeing rights, it distances and deviates from them.

The research results show that leaving prison, celebrated and lived emotionally, announces a new beginning. However, the statements describe that these moments are permeated by feelings of insecurity, anguish, and abandonment. Freedom comes but is not accompanied by material and emotional support, as demonstrated by the lack of mobility conditions for released women and the lack of contact with their families.

The prison doors open so that women, with their children in their arms, can go on with their lives alone, as if the State that imprisoned them no longer had any responsibility for those lives. Even in prison, such responsibility materializes under a dynamic that seeks to benefit the baby while punishing women¹⁷. Here, we underscore the State’s participation in producing vulnerabilities that affect these women and all people who go through the prison, as it understands that its role is merely punitive.

The fact that many women released from the prison system self-declare as black refers to the issue of mass incarceration of this segment and the criminalization of poverty, considering the socioeconomic inequality that affects this community. Slave-o-crat Brazil is renewed, takes on new contours, and continues to make people vulnerable. Vulnerability in its different (individual, social, and programmatic) aspects does not occur by chance but from a conception that understands that some lives are worth less^{8,12}.

When analyzing the vulnerabilities and perspectives of restructuring the lives of women who have experienced motherhood in prison, we should pay attention to their corresponding social structure. It is clear then that there are few prospects for rebuilding life in a society that oppresses, marked by differences in gender, class, and ethnicity, aggravated by the prison passage. Likewise, the impact of such an experience on the health of these women must be analyzed from the same perspective. Intersectoral policies and actions are essential, as are professional attitudes more sensitive to the vulnerable conditions that affect these women’s lives and their families.

Final considerations

This study aimed to analyze the vulnerabilities and perspectives of restructuring the lives of women who experienced motherhood in prison. The limitations of this study are its temporal and

local contextualization and the lack of a database with information for monitoring women released from the prison system, or, when it exists, the difficulty of accessing it, and little scientific production to support the findings.

The results reveal that leaving the prison system does not necessarily mean freedom. Identity crossroads continue to accompany women and their children so that after leaving prison, vulnerability manifests in the same way or more cruelly than before.

How society is structured in social inequalities, which make these social segments vulnerable, contributes to the fact that women do not have access to fundamental human rights and remain subjected to situations that expose them, together with their children, social exclusion, impoverishment, criminalization, and victimization of all types of violence. There are questions about how health actions and programs can mitigate vulnerabilities in the life setting of these

women and how the analysis of the social situation of women released from the prison system can influence group health practices. We should understand that health care occurs daily and that looking at the social context reveals how and why people get sick.

Regarding the health field, this research helps to understand female imprisonment and the role of health professionals in violence and deprivation of rights, as there is a lack of national and international studies on this topic. It is essential to develop other investigations to understand the experience of motherhood in prison, including factors such as the provision of services and health professionals and the support network in the return of women to their families. The knowledge produced here is expected to equip professionals and managers and lead them to develop and implement strategies to protect and prevent harm to the health of women in deprivation of liberty, especially pregnant women.

Collaborations

G Dalenogare worked on data collection. G Dalenogare, LB Vieira and R Maffaccioli worked on the study design, data analysis and interpretation, and discussion of results. LB Vieira, R Maffaccioli and RM Dotta worked on writing or critically reviewed the content and reviewed and approved the final version of the paper.

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