Flows in a Female Penitentiary: Manoeuvring between Absence and Presence of Family Members

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Em **Fluxos em cadeias femininas: Manobras entre as ausências e presenças dos familiares**, objetivamos compreender os fluxos existentes entre as mulheres presas e seus familiares por meio de pesquisa (quantitativa e qualitativa) realizada em uma penitenciária feminina de Belo Horizonte. A literatura desse campo aponta para uma alta porosidade entre a vida interna e externa às prisões, mas quando se trata de mulheres encarceradas, tais estudos ressaltam seu abandono. Argumentamos que não há abandono, mas reestruturação familiar que, apesar de muitas vezes não permitir visitas frequentes, viabiliza fluxos essenciais para garantir a sobrevivência da detenta — com muitas consequências para suas famílias.

Palavras-chave: encarceramento feminino, sobrevivência no cárcere, fluxos prisionais, reorganização familiar, seletividade criminal

In this paper we aim to understand the flows between female inmates and their family members through quantitative and qualitative research conducted in a female penitentiary in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. The literature in this field indicates a high porosity between life inside and outside of prisons, yet when it comes to incarcerated women, these studies have stressed their abandonment. We argue that there is no abandonment, but a family restructuring that, though very often not allowing frequent visits, nevertheless enables essential flows that ensure the inmate's survival—with many consequences for their families.

Keywords: female imprisonment, prison survival, prison flows, family restructuring, criminal selectivity

Introduction[1]

naugurated in 1956,[2] the Estevão Pinto Female Penitentiary Complex (Piep)[3] is the largest and oldest penitentiary for women in Minas Gerais, with a capacity for around 400 inmates. It was inside this unit that, through research combining quantitative and qualitative techniques, we sought answers to the following question: *how do prison flows happen between female inmates and their family members?*

The question informing this study sets out from two basic premises. First, prison does not represent the end of affective networks (DUARTE, 2013), but it restructures these fabrics, accompanied by the forming of new affective webs, which intersect with the previous ones (LAGO and ZAMBONI, 2017). Second, far from being an isolated social system, a total institution—as proposed by Goffman (2001)—the prison forms part of a social circuit, a fundamental part of a series of flows (material and emotional, legal and illegal) that shape the social landscape (GODOI, 2015).

Analyses that try to surpass classic paradigms emphasizing the isolation of prison units have gained importance over recent decades in Brazil (LOURENÇO and ALVAREZ, 2017). These studies focus on comprehending how criminal organizations, especially the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC), have overflowed from the prisons to act outside, in peripherical areas of large cities (ADORNO and DIAS, 2013). There are studies, however, that examine overflows that go beyond those used by criminal practices (GODOI, 2015). Family networks and their importance for the physical and emotional maintenance of the inmates have become one of the fundamental discussions of this field (SILVESTRE, 2012; DARKE and KARAM, 2016).

The studies that deal with these overflows share in common the scrutiny of male prison units (DIAS, 2011). It is necessary, therefore, to advance in our understanding of these processes in the case of female penitentiaries (PADOVANI, 2015). The scholars that set out to comprehend this world indicate that the exchanges between environments (internal and external) are smaller in these female prisons (SOUZA, 2016). Families are considered more like absences, given their low frequency on visiting days (BECKER *et al.*, 2016; QUEIROZ, 2015; OLIVEIRA and SANTOS, 2012; VARELLA, 2017).

If imprisoned women do not count on their families on visiting days, how do they maintain their affectives ties and obtain the survival items not provided by the prison unit? Does the lower intensity of exchanges with the outside environment (identified by the aforementioned studies) alter the everyday dynamics within the female prisons?

These questions were the starting point for our research at the Piep, leading to the conclusion that incarcerated women maintain intense flows with family members on the outside. Nevertheless, these flows are shaped by contexts that are different to their male counterparts. For this reason, their network configurations diverge from those observed in the studies of male penal institutions. The physical and emotional impositions, generated by the social structures that produce gender inequalities, resided in the core of the peculiarities of the flows established between the female inmates and their families and not in the moral judgements related to gender as some classic studies in this field has previously indicated (LEMGRUBER, 1999; CERNEKA, 2009).

In our study with women incarcerated in Belo Horizonte, we observed that the relationships they maintain with the world inside and outside the prisons form three types of figurations. To introduce them, we begin this paper with a review of the literature, followed by a methodological description of this study. Next, we examine the factors that influence the establishment of each type of flow by the inmates. Finally, we describe the three types of figurations identified, focusing on the most common of them, and indicate how the new studies of female incarceration contribute to a better understanding of the transitivity between the world inside and outside women prisons (TELLES, 2010; GODOI, 2015).

Forgotten or assisted: what do studies of female incarceration say?

Contemporary studies have paid attention to the central role of families in prison dynamics (KREAGER, 2016). According to Darke and Karam (2016), a primordial role in the correctional routines of Latin America is played by family members, since the State fails to ensure items of survival and relies on prisoners' external networks to supply them. Other studies discussing the families of people deprived of their freedom seek to understand how incarceration generates effects beyond the inmates, especially on children (DALAIRE, 2007; GELLER, GARFINKEL and WESTERN, 2011; POSADA, 2015), and how these effects alter the meanings and experiences of those who are imprisoned (RICHIE, 2003; DUARTE, 2013).

What becomes evident is that family represents a constant connection between prison and the collectivities that are not limited to behind correctional walls, generating what Vera Telles (2010) nominates as transitivity. Godoi (2010) includes these affective connections in what he calls 'communicating vessels,' porosities through which the exchange of values and goods is maintained between those who are in prison and those who are not. It is through these vessels, the author argues, that rules and behaviors central to the prison dynamic, especially those linked to criminal organizations, overflow outside the prison. They reach not only individuals directly linked to prisoners, but all those from whom inmates are intended to be kept separate through incarceration, blurring the boundaries between the legal and illegal.

Godoi (2015) deepens our comprehension of these flows and emphasizes that, far from being isolated universes, prisons are part of a circuit that composes and reconfigures the urban landscape. Studying the 'communicating vessels' and 'mediating agents' that connect the inside and outside of penal institutions, the author stresses that these mechanisms are means through which the legal and illegal are articulated in the constitution of order, reaffirming the idea of transitivity proposed by Telles (2010). Family members are mediating agents alongside, for example, volunteers, religious figures or employees of the units. The inmates are thus integrated into society through ties that occur not in the absence of the State, but rather as a form of enabling the sustentation of the State, represented by the prison institution (LOURENÇO and ROCHA, 2013; DARKE and KARAM, 2016).

Although the idea that the flows that occur between the prison and the spaces outside it work to shape the correctional world is already a consensus in this field of studies (GODOI, 2015; TELLES, 2010), it is still a challenge to comprehend how this occurs in female units, given that the majority of studies take male units as the empirical counterpoint (LOURENÇO and ALVAREZ, 2017). What stands out in female prisons is the low number of visitors compared to the disputed spaces at the entrances to male prisons (LEMGRUBER, 1999; BECKER *et al.*, 2016; CENERKA, 2009; QUEIROZ, 2015; OLIVEIRA and SANTOS, 2012; VARELLA, 2017). The

reasons for the empty queues for visiting women frequently mobilize ideas related to gender roles, explaining this absence by the moral judgment to which they are subject with their conviction (BECKER et al., 2016; LEMGRUBER, 1999).

Manuela Cunha (2002) runs counter to this idea of the 'abandonment' of imprisoned women, revealing the continuity between the female prison and the poor neighborhoods of Portugal. It is not the vessels of communication and exchanges that stand out, but the presence, in the same prison, of people who already maintained relations before incarceration, forming family and community networks. Changes to legislation and to forms of police surveillance, as well as the reorganization of female penitentiaries, are leading these networks of known people to correctional facilities, as extensions of their communities. The penitentiary is thus transformed, reinforcing the ties of family and community solidarity that existed beforehand.

In Brazil, this discussion has reverberated through the problematization of the uniformity of people affected by the penal system, generally poor and black (CAMPOS, 2017; POSADA, 2015). This selectivity does not always lead to the imprisonment of individuals with prior relations of sociability in the same unit (as occurs in Portugal's female establishments). This also depends on the structure of the Penitentiary System such as the number and geographic distribution of correctional facilities. Nevertheless, this phenomenon renders poignant the focus on poor communities, which end up imprisoned due to the security policies adopted (MONTEIRO and CARDOSO, 2013).

In this scenario, special relevance is given to those studies examining how, in poor families, the distancing of one of the members due to incarceration leads, for example, to an increase in the everyday budgetary restrictions for ones that remain free outside (DALAIRE, 2007; GELLER, GARFINKEL and WESTERN, 2011; POSADA, 2015; RICHIE, 2003). These analyses indicate that the impacts are not limited to the loss of a source of income (PETTIT and WESTERN, 2004), but include the extra cost of survival of the inmate in prison (DARKE and KARAM, 2016) and, when there are children, the reorganization of childcare (GRANJA, 2014; MIYAMOTO and KROHLING, 2012).

In the case of women, the incarceration may have greater impacts on the family situation. In Brazil's social structure, marked by gender inequalities, women tend to be, prior to prison, those mainly responsible for children (SOUZA, 2016). When men are imprisoned, most children stay with their mothers. However, when the latter are imprisoned the most common solution is for the offspring to be distributed among various relatives, especially grandmothers, increasing the overload of non-remunerated work faced by women (POSADA, 2015). In other words, although the selectivity of the Criminal Justice Systems approximates male and female inmates in terms of the consequences that imprisonment has for their families (BRAMAN, 2002), different family contexts between men and women lead to particular reorganizations following the incarceration of a member of the group (PETTIT and WESTERN, 2004).

We argue that these peculiar reorganizations due to gender interfere in the formation of the flows and figurations maintained among prisoners and their families, leading to the differentiation of the routines (especially visits) of incarcerated men and women. To better understand these flows and figurations in a female penitentiary in Belo Horizonte, we present below the methodology utilized in this study.

Methodology

This paper is based on 12 months fieldwork carried out in the Piep.[4] In the first stage, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four female inmates and five female employees in order to reconnoiter the field. These statements were recorded and transcribed, allowing the elaboration of a first version of the survey questionnaire. After being submitted to a pre-test and altered in response to the difficulties identified in the exploratory phase, we began to administer the survey in December 2017.

The survey was administered in all prison regimes: closed, semi-open and open.[5] It was also extended to the 'outside cells,' intended for women prisoners who do not live alongside the others because they are at risk of being killed by another inmate or because they are pretrial prisoners with completed higher education.[6] Incursions were also made in the workshops.[7] We did not go to the school because the survey was mostly administered in a non-academic period (December, January and February) and the internal students were 'on holiday' in the dormitories.

In Table 1, we present the sample of respondents, emphasizing that we sought to interview a number of prisoners proportional to the number existing in the prison regime in question, so as to guarantee the same representativeness of all the strata of the target population in the sample.

Table 1: Distribution of inmates in the Piep and sample from the survey conducted in the unit (2017/2018)

Type of regime	Total inmates		Total interviewees	
	N	%	N	%
Closed Regime	212	54%	91	54%
Semi-Open Regime	143	36%	69	41%
Open Regime	3	1%	1	1%
Pretrial Prisoners	38	10%	9	5%
Total	396	100%	170	100%

Source: Piep (database 01/02/2018).

Based on the preliminary analysis of the quantitative data, we returned to the field to obtain a better comprehension of the relationship inside the networks. This stage took place between May and July 2018 with the use of semi-structured scripts similar to those used in the exploratory phase of this research. As in the initial phase, interviews were held without the presence of third parties, always in a closed room. Eight prisoners and four employees were heard, and their statements once again recorded and transcribed for future analysis.

We used the SPSS software for quantitative data and N-Vivo software for qualitative. In the quantitative analysis, we sought to equate the occurrences of the related behaviors with the significance of the statistical association between them. In the qualitative analysis, we separated the interviews according to the researched groups (inmate and employees). Then, we made a reading of the entire material and finally we emphasized what seemed of the most importance in each account. We highlighted those excerpts that revealed conflicts or compliances; hierarchies; demands; isolation or community feelings; and questions linked to gender distinctions.

Based on the accounts of female inmates, we reproduced graphically the functioning of their networks, stressing the place of their family members and the intersections within the prison world. With the inmates in the centre, we linked them to the cited persons, differentiating those who formed part of the internal environment and those who were on the outside. Next, we highlighted the flows that occurred between the interviewees and the cited persons – who sent money to whom, who visited whom and which were the arrangements necessary to ensure these flows. Finally, based on the graphs, we created categories that emerged either through repetition or through exceptionality, in order to respond to the research question.

Family centrality and figurations

The idea of figuration, which expresses how human beings depend on one another and fulfil determined functions for each other (SPIERENBURG, 1998), guides our analysis. The concept was developed by Norbert Elias (2008[1970]), who defines figurations as networks of interdependence created among individuals immersed in social life, in a situation that resembles a power game. In these interactions, there are no dominant and unquestionable players. With each play, the directions of the game can be altered by everyone and the form in which the players cooperate or tension the teams interferes in this progress. Players' decisions are based on rational calculations and on what the author calls 'economy of affects.' In other words, emotions act in conjunction with rationality in defining the actions and opinions of individuals, determining their figurations.

In the prison system, power games occur among imprisoned women, prison officers, and other groups that form part of the inmates' routine, such as religious volunteers, teachers, public defenders and others. They are shaped by resources that are external to the prison unit, which ensures different figurations to these women. From the soap that can be negotiated on the informal market of goods to the access to a private lawyer, these resources reach the Piep through the inmates' networks (especially the family networks) in a constant two-way flow both from outside to inside and from inside to outside. The higher or lower possibility of mobilizing these resources influences the inmates' position in hierarchies and divisions in the networks of sociability. But what determines the inequalities in the access to such resources?

Financially, a woman's participation in figurations within the prison depends on possessing goods or money, which means having work in the prison or someone from the family sending products capable of being traded. It also may imply on submitting oneself to the demands for services on the informal (and very often illegal) market of the correctional units. Emotionally, women with very restricted networks of outside support tend to rely on prison colleagues to construct networks of sociability indispensable to any individual. Consequently, contact with the outside world is essential for the economic and emotional capacity of a woman deprived of freedom, being a determinant factor of their interactions and, consequently, of their positions in power games taking place in this environment.

To better understand this diagram of relationships, we first used quantitative data and the association between variables with the chi-square test. By comparing the frequencies observed with those expected, which correspond to an equal distribution of cases between the variables, the test measures the association between one variable and another (LIMA, 2018). When this test generates a significance lower than 0.050, there is an association between the variables, without causality being determined. Significance values higher than 0.050 indicate independence between the variables.

We set out from the initial premise that figurations are the result of a woman's connection with the outside world. Thus, we used 'visits made by the mothers of the inmates' as an independent variable. In male environments, it is wives, female partners and mothers who provide inmates with the resources they need to participate in power games (DUARTE, 2013; SILVESTRE, 2012, GODOI, 2015). In female prisons, this function is primarily performed by mothers, given that the male partners of these women refuse to submit themselves to the rules stipulated for visits or are themselves imprisoned (SOUZA, 2016; PADOVANI, 2015).

Our survey indicates that mothers are the most constant external presence in the correctional facility: 31.8% of inmates are visited by them, corroborating the idea that they are the main providers of support to the prisoners. The presence of other family members is less constant: siblings represent 27.6% of visits; partners (male or female), 13.5%; and fathers, 8.2%. This data

confirms the previous findings based on male penitentiaries, which emphasizes that the queue in prisons are dominated by women (SILVESTRE, 2012; GODOI, 2015).

Fathers tend to be more absent in women's lives even before detention: 29% of female inmates lived with their mothers prior to incarceration compared to 8.8% who said that they lived with their father. In the case of siblings, despite women having related a high level of visits of these family members, this presence is much less frequent than the mothers. While 8.8% of siblings visit inmates more than once per month, among mothers this rate is 21.8%. It is worth remembering that these absences may be related to the capture of these family members by the Criminal Justice System: 28.3% of prisoners reported that their siblings are or had already been incarcerated, which makes visits impossible in some cases and difficult in others due to visitation rules.

Children are not constant presences in female units for a series of reasons. The most important one arises from the fact that, in the case of minors under 18, visiting the prison depends on being accompanied by other people and special authorizations obtained from courts or from a Prison Administration Office[8]. Since it is the mothers of female inmates that become responsible for their children (in 44% of cases in which the inmates reported being a mother), we consider these grandmothers to be central to a woman's family reconfiguration and may prefer to use their scant available resources to go to the Piep alone.

Since external visits are the most evident contact among female prisoners and their families, we consider the variable "visit of the mother" to be the most adequate for measuring the strength of prisoners' external networks. By strength of the external networks, we refer to the capacity of family members to organize themselves in order to effectively meet the needs of all members of the group (DARKE and KARAM, 2016; GODOI, 2015). It includes the woman in prison and strengthens bonds, which influences the effort of family members to maintain their ties with the female inmates (DUARTE, 2013; SILVESTRE, 2012). To understand this relationship, we compared this variable with others identifying factors that may be associated with the formation of figurations important to the power games inside the Piep.

The first of these variables was the women's participation in the financial maintenance of the house before prison, which helps measure their centrality (or not) in the economic life of the family group. The data obtained in the survey indicate that women who alleged not to have participated in the maintenance prior to imprisonment receive more visits from mothers (31%) compared to those who were the main provider or helped in this maintenance (12% and 25% respectively) (Graph 1).

Graph 1: Visits by mothers and participation of the Piep inmates in home maintenance prior to imprisonment (2017/2018)
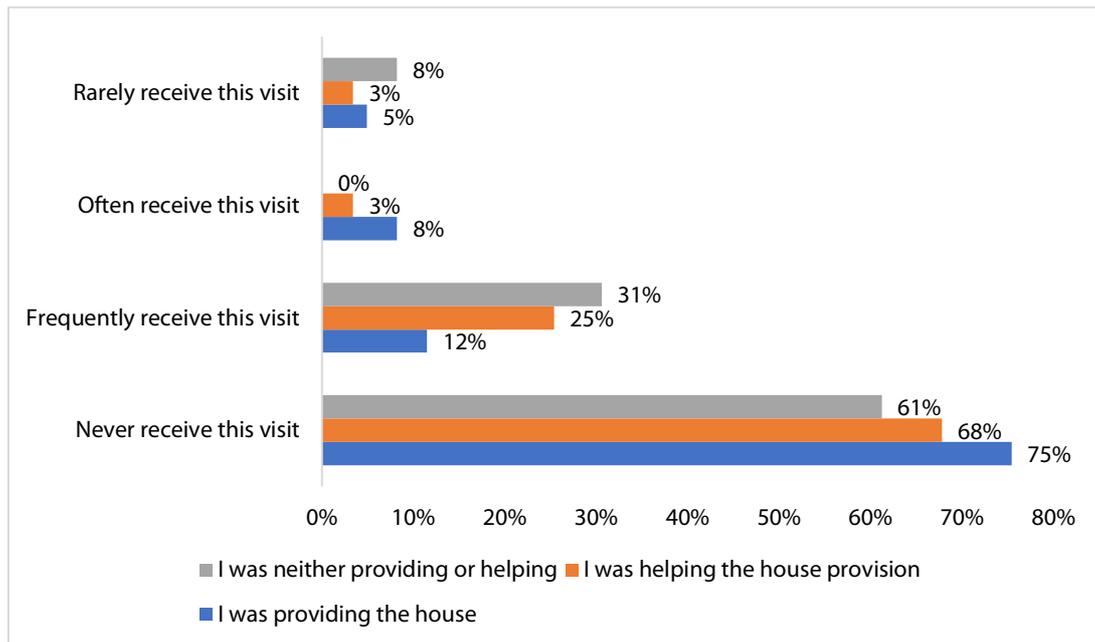
Chi-square= 27.60, df=9, P<0.001

The significance found in the chi-square test comparing the two variables, shown in Graph 1, indicates that there is an association between the variables. The imprisonment of women who were important to the financial maintenance of families generates more difficulties for restructuring these family networks, as emphasized in the international studies (WILDEMAN, 2014). We believe that these difficulties create more obstacles to the presence of these mothers on visiting days, given that the money available for the family was reduced by the removal of one of its providers. This fact ends up influencing the figurations that women need to develop in the Piep to survive while they carry out their sentence.

Obviously, the woman's centrality in family networks cannot be measured exclusively from the financial standards, although this is a variable of paramount importance in international studies (BRAMAN, 2002; KIRK and WAKEFIELD, 2018). We turn, therefore, to an evaluation of the affective position of these women in their families. To this end, we used the variable related to the care of children, measured through the cohabitation of the inmates with their mother prior to their imprisonment.

We began by comparing this variable with the pattern of visits by mothers to continue with the same argument used so far. We observed that 55% of women who lived with their children before prison did not receive visits from their own mothers. However, 77% of inmates who did not have all their children cohabiting with them stated that they did not receive visits from their mothers in the unit (Graph 2).

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Graph 2: Visits by mothers and cohabitation of the Piep inmates with their children before prison (2017/2018)
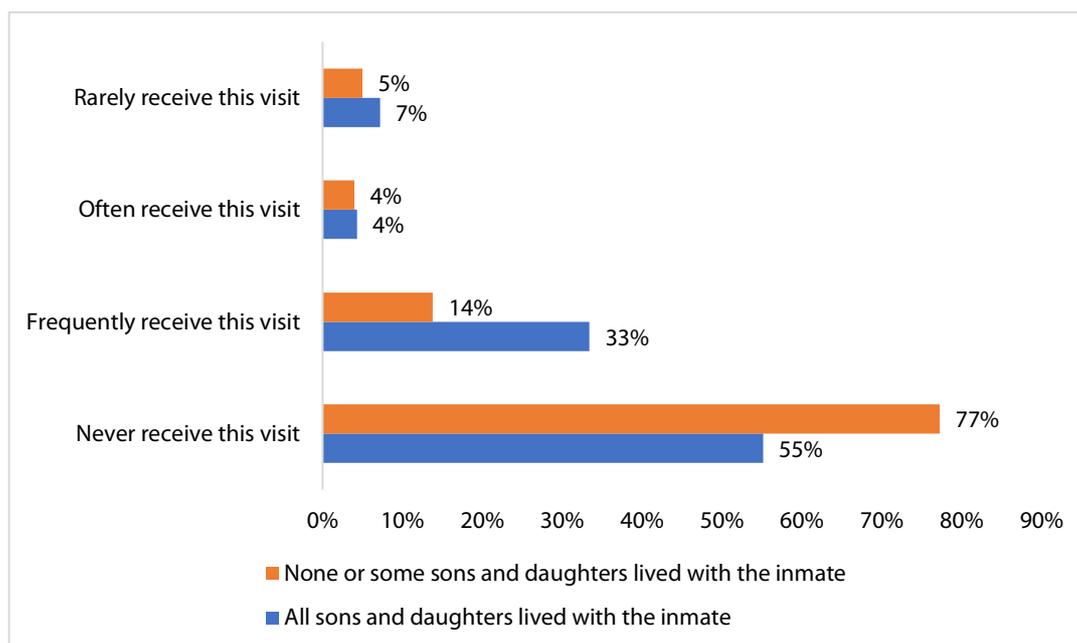
Chi-square= 10.47, df=3, p<0.050

The significance in the chi-square test confirms the association between the variables. Although the imprisonment of women who played a central role in the care of their children leads to a greater family reorganization (RICHIE, 2003; GRANJA, 2014), these are the female inmates most visited by their mothers. Consequently, the affective centrality of the inmates prior to incarceration is important in comprehending the figurations developed by them after conviction.

This perception is corroborated by comparison of the same variable, cohabitation with children, with visits by these children. The inmates who cohabited with all their children before prison have higher percentages of visits: 25% compared to 7% of those inmates who had not been living with all their children (Graph 3). Among those who did not live with their children, 90% did not receive them in visits, a very high figure compared to the 65% who lived with their children but were not visited by them.

Graph 3: Visits by children of women imprisoned in the Piep by cohabitation with children before prison (2017/2018)
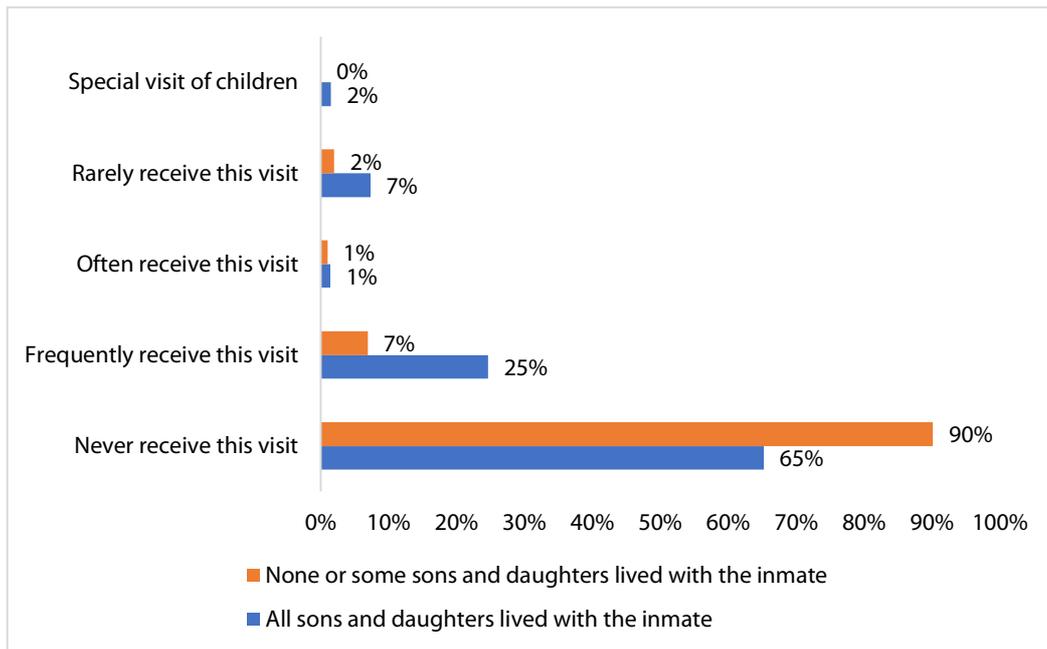
Chi-square=16.58, df=3, p<0.010

Although visits by children are subjected to other variables, as discussed earlier, the significance found in the chi-square test demonstrates that this prior cohabitation is associated with visits frequency. The quantitative data indicates, therefore, that the inmate's family centrality (financial and emotional) before imprisonment has an impact on the reorganization of their family networks after incarceration. The relationship tends to be negative in the case of financial centrality (higher centrality prior to prison, fewer visits) and positive in the case of affective centrality (higher centrality prior to prison, more visits).

The strength of these family networks outside prison will influence the construction of networks within the prison world. It is precisely in the intersection of these two networks that figurations are formed, allowing these women to participate in power games while imprisoned. Nevertheless, it is the data obtained through qualitative research techniques that allows these conclusions to be detailed. It is this data that offers examples of how these networks become restructured and intersected.

Family and prison interdependencies

Comparison between the figurations reported by the interviewees involved two stages. The first, merely visual, helped to organize the 13 graphic representations of power games

within the prison environment and outside it. With individuals who form part of the prison routine, like inmates and employees depicted in red; and individuals from outside, especially family members depicted in blue, it becomes easy to observe the patterns in which one of the colors stands out or the two merges.

Next, we sought to identify the functional interconnections between these individuals, essential to understanding the figurations as defined by Elias (2008[1970]). The flows between women, whether financial or affective, were observed in terms of their nature (visits, phone calls, exchange of favors in prison, and so on) in order to create the types of figuration in which they were later classified.

In the external power games, sending items to the inmates and visiting them were considered strong bonds with family members, while relationships based only on phone calls and letters were qualified as weaker ties. The sending of money by prisoners to families was seen as strong, as well as other exchanges, such as support in legal assistance (by family members for prisoners and vice-versa), since they reveal the efforts made by the group's members to help each other. In the internal power games, affective relationships between inmates, financial exchanges that involve employees, and favors made by other prisoners and employees were considered strong ties. Relationships based only on surveillance by agents, on the other hand, were understood to be less important.

This analysis generated three types of figuration: networks based on internal arrangements; networks based on external arrangements; and mixed networks. These latter were predominant among our interviewees.

Type 1: Networks based on external arrangements

In this configuration, family webs are sufficiently strong to guarantee prisoners some autonomy in relation to power games in which they participate internally. Most of the flows established by inmates occur outside the prison environment. Four of thirteen interviewed inmates described figurations of this type, and we used one of them (Sílvia) as a visual example (Figure 1). Blue represents individuals outside prison and red individuals from the internal universe, a pattern repeated in other images.

Figure 1: Graphic representation of the figuration related by Sílvia
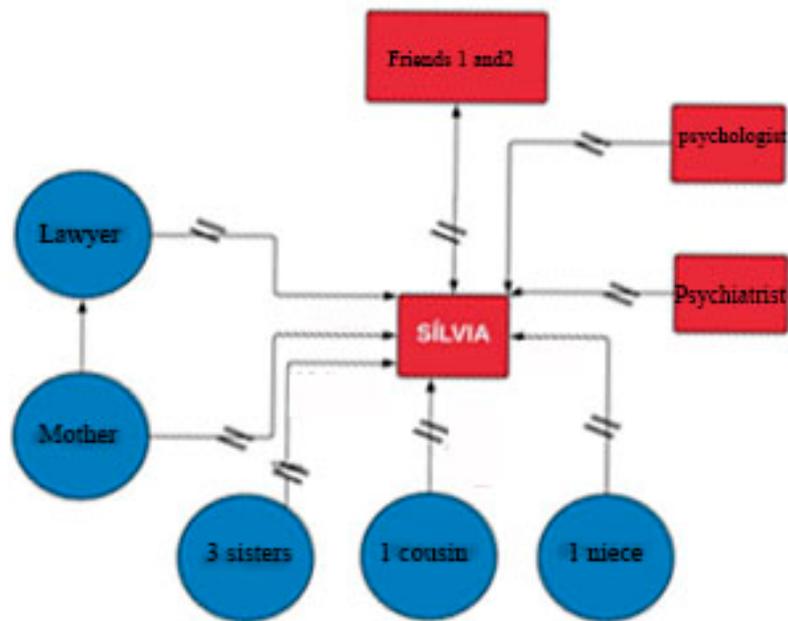
Source: Piep (2018).

The women classified in figuration Type 1, like Sílvia, rely on the constant receipt of 'belongings' – that is, items of survival sent by the family via postal services. This flow also guarantees greater comfort for inmates through the sending of goods not provided by the prison unit, such as soaps and shampoos[9]. These items ensure power in the commerce between prisoners, giving the woman a prominent position in the internal games. For this reason, families send more items than the inmates need, the extras being used in the informal trade of goods or exchanged for services. If each day one inmate is responsible for cleaning the cell, for example, someone who has access to items can use them to pay a colleague to perform the service on her behalf.

For women in this figuration, it is easier to access psychiatric medications, which tend to be unavailable in the Piep, or phone cards for public telephones in the penitentiary, to which each inmate has access once a fortnight. Legal assistance is facilitated, since they are accompanied by private lawyers who keep them regularly informed about legal proceedings. They also defend the inmates in the meetings of the Disciplinary Board, that take place when women are charged with some misdemeanor within the penitentiary.

The interviewees who reported this type of figuration present themselves as women who did not participate in the maintenance of their families prior to imprisonment or at least were not the main person responsible for family provision (like 28% of the women

who answered the survey). They also rely on external incomes that do not cease with their imprisonment, such as pensions from the death of their husbands or savings acquired over their lifetime. This money was cited as essential to ensuring payment of lawyer's fees, the sending of items to them – or both.

Since they are deprived of their freedom and, therefore, with reduced mobility, it is obviously not possible for these women to dispense with the prison networks. For families to buy psychiatric medications, the unit's physician needs to give them a prescription. Thus, as can be observed in Figure 1, it is necessary to access employees from the penitentiary's assistance. For them to buy services from colleagues with the items they receive, it is essential for the inmate to be successful in her negotiations with the Piep's employees so that she will not be punished because of this trade. Commerce is not officially allowed, despite being accepted as routine by all inmates and employees interviewed in this research.

Consequently, the argument made here is not that prisoners who present this figuration are independent of prison networks and their internal dynamics. What we highlight is that they participate in everyday negotiations from a privileged position, assured to them by their access to outside resources. This negotiation is not unrestricted, given that it is filtered by the penitentiary's rules; but it is broader than those of other inmates. This is precisely the opposite of what happens with women who present figuration Type 2, which we describe below.

Type 2: Networks based on internal arrangements

Just one of thirteen inmates interviewed presented this pattern of figuration, whose basic characteristic is the high dependence on negotiations taking place inside the prison. A weak external family network, incapable of supplying the affective and financial needs of the inmate, entails a scarcity of resources available for her in the penitentiary (Figure 2). As well as depending on internal arrangements to survive, she has little power in prison games. Below is the graphic representation of this figuration in which the dotted lines indicate weaker connections between individuals.

Figure 2: Graphic representation of the figuration related to Raquel
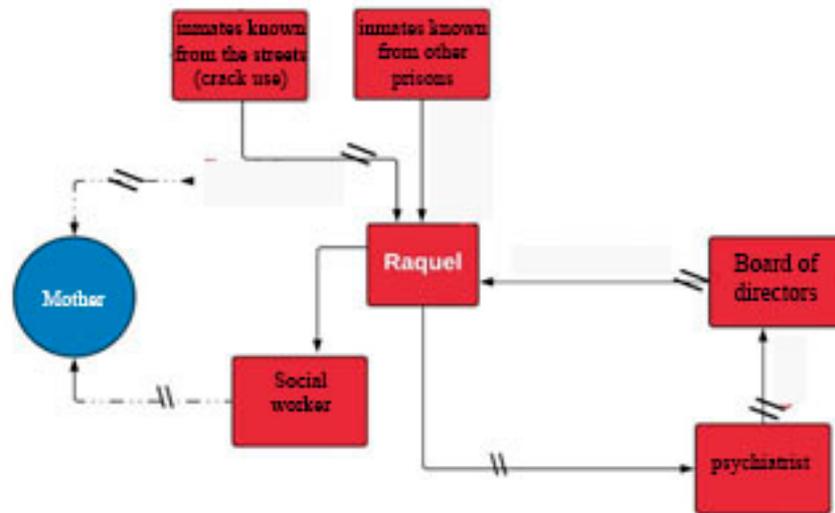
Source: Piep (2018).

The woman who presented this figuration, Raquel, was carrying out her sentence in a semi-open regime. Despite having some access to the outside environment, she maintained a network primarily constructed in the prison environment. Although she initially replied that she had lived with her mother before being imprisoned, the interviewee made it clear during the conversation that she used to spend more time sleeping rough in the street. In other words, the family ties were already weak and limited only to her mother prior to incarceration, which undoubtedly affected the possible arrangements after she was imprisoned.

Raquel has no children and did not maintain the family. Unlike women who presented figuration Type 1, she had difficulties maintaining ties with her family members before incarceration. The only person outside the penitentiary with whom she has contact is her mother. This tie is upheld via phone calls and, even for this contact, she depends on some internal negotiations. The interviewee reported that her mother has no credit on her pre-paid mobile, meaning that she cannot receive reverse-charge calls. Consequently, the inmate has to rely on the loan of phone cards from other inmates or on the intermediation of the social assistant from the prison unit to speak to her mother.

She reported needing a paid job to maintain herself and to help her mother outside, a vacancy that she had not obtained yet when she was interviewed. It is worth emphasizing that achieving such vacancies involves support from various sectors of the prison unit, ranging from social assistance to prison officers, in a competition for positions available to just 16.6% of inmates.[10]

The fact that Raquel had not obtained this position indicates a certain weakness in power games occurring within the prison system.

The dependence on prison networks is clear when Raquel mentions that she uses controlled medicine prescribed to her by the unit's physician. When she entered the semi-open regime and left the unit for the first time, the Piep did not provide medications for all seven days she would spend on the street. She 'lost control,' reverted to using drugs and remained on the run until she was imprisoned again.

We argue, therefore, that dependence on the prison unit networks is related to the weakness of the external support network, which may have been caused by Raquel's homelessness prior to imprisonment. It is difficult to estimate how many imprisoned women were in this situation. In the survey, when we asked about places where they lived before imprisonment, four of 170 interviewees replied that they lived on the streets (2%). This percentage may be underestimated given that the inmate who presented figuration Type 2 in the semi-structured interview, when asked where she had lived, provided her mother's address. Only later was it made clear that she had not actually lived at this location. Hence, this type of figuration, despite being less frequent in our study, may be more common than we imagine.

Type 3: Networks based on the entanglement of internal and external webs

Type 3 seems to be the predominant figuration among the female inmates of the Piep. In the semi-structured interviews, eight of thirteen women described this type of network. This is the most frequent figuration because the majority of the interviewed prisoners (in the survey and in the semi-structured interviews) were central in their family dynamics, as presumed by traditional gender roles (BALES and PARSONS, 1956). Observing the variables understood as indicative of the development of this type of figuration in the context of the survey, we can affirm that almost 2/3 of inmates have the determinant elements: 36% were the main adult responsible for maintaining the home and 54% had children under their care before being imprisoned.

The more central the woman was in her family web before incarceration, the higher the odds that she will continue to have an influence on her family outside the prison (RICHIE, 2003). To this end, she and her family members need to find creative ways to ensure both: the items that the inmate needs inside the unit and those that the other members of the group need outside the prison walls.

Figuration type 3 is not, therefore, a mixture of the two previous types. Rather than the addition of internal and external arrangements, this type of figuration demands complex negotiations in which all actors (internal and external) participate. The flows that traverse the prison walls in both directions are more intense and the entanglement of family and prison networks is accentuated.

Any change in any of power games (internal or external) has the potential to interrupt or intensify the flows and to alter the entire negotiation that permeates the interdependencies between the individuals. As an example, we detail the figuration related by Mariana (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Graphic representation of the figuration related by Mariana
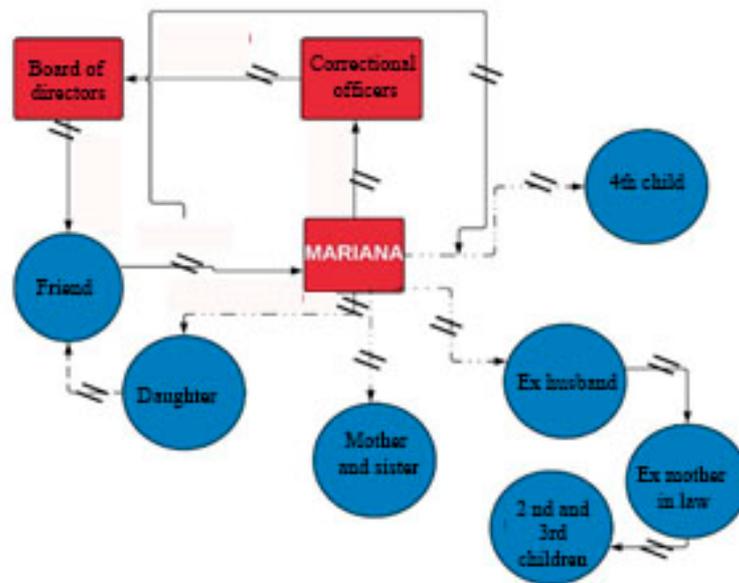
Source: Piep (2018).

When Mariana was imprisoned, she left behind four children: an adolescent boy, an already adult daughter, a child of four and a one-year-old baby. All four lived with her when she was incarcerated, which happened two and a half years before the interview. After her imprisonment, the older daughter went to live with her boyfriend and the adolescent was sent to live with his father in a municipality 540 kilometers from Belo Horizonte. The two children remained with their father, Mariana's husband when she was imprisoned. This husband shared the maintenance of the house with her. Mariana had contributed financially to the home through the income obtained as a freelance seller of clothes, jewellery, cosmetics and other items.

In the first months after her incarceration, Mariana was visited by her husband, who even took the children to see her once. When the interview took place, the couple was no longer together, corroborating the thesis that female incarceration contributes to the dissolution of matrimonial ties (LEMGRUBER, 1999; SOARES, 2002). The end of the conjugal relationship made it more difficult for her to receive news about her children, since Mariana's former husband does not allow her older daughter to visit the siblings or maintain contact with them. It was with

this older daughter that Mariana maintained a close tie, initially with regular visits, but at the time of interview just by telephone since her daughter was pregnant and became more bothered by the body search procedures. Mariana used to speak to her teenage son by telephone occasionally, since this required more credits on the phone card as he lived in another city.

In Mariana's case, there is an enormous dependency on items and internal commerce for her to be able to communicate with her son and daughter. The form in which these items reach her is symbolic of the entanglement of prison and family networks that characterize this type of figuration. The inmate obtained a vacancy in the craftwork workshop. She makes bikinis, carpets and similar things, which are mostly sold to the penitentiary officers. The money from the sales is given to a friend authorized by her to take it.

It is this money that Mariana uses to access the items she needs in prison. This kit should contain the material needed for the craftwork as well as shampoo, soap and cigarettes. To set the circle in motion, Mariana phones her older daughter, tells her that the money is available and gives her a list of what she needs to be sent. The daughter, in turn, calls Mariana's friend, who fetches the money and sends the items. Hence, the entire negotiation in relation to the work vacancy, right to make calls and rules for the sending and receiving funds needs to be mobilized to enable Mariana's arrangement.

Marked by the negotiations that pass through actors inside and outside the prison unit for the inmate to be able to survive inside and help with the survival of the family outside, the flows involved in the figuration type 3 may be altered when the inmate progresses to another prison regime. It may increase the odds of reassuming some of the functions performed by her before imprisonment, such as caring for her children.

Maria, when interviewed, was in a semi-open regime. She was the mother of children who, at the time of her imprisonment, were aged 3, 14, 15 and 16 years. She continued to be an important reference for them, who had organized themselves so that the older siblings were caring for the younger ones. The middle two sons were, over the seven years of their mother's incarceration, captured by the Criminal Justice System with one imprisoned at the time of the interview and the other, a minor convicted for an offence, had just left the Juvenile Detention Center.

Her account about the end of the detention of her younger son, the minor, provides a good illustration of the entanglement of internal and external webs. In her periods of 'descent' or temporary release,[11] she went to the Public Defender's Office various times to ensure that the procedural requests in relation to her son were made. This resulted in his release on the last day on which Maria was out before returning to prison. She personally went to fetch him at the door of the Juvenile Institution where he had been detained.

The money obtained by Maria in the works undertaken in prison was sent to her children. As a consequence, the fact that she had lost a work position, for reasons that remained unclear in her account, had an impact on the life of her family members outside. Even with the contribution of her salary, continuous efforts were needed from the children to maintain themselves outside. In this context, it was difficult for them to help their mother inside by sending her items. One of the strategies used by Maria to get round these obstacles was the friendship with another inmate (Larissa) and her family.

Larissa was a friend who introduced Maria to her own family on visiting days. All of them became close. When Larissa left prison, her father continued to visit Maria. More than this: he began to send Maria items, including materials to make craftwork when she worked in the workshop. Larissa, who was already outside, began to visit Maria's children and tell the imprisoned mother how they all were in letters.

It is clear how Maria needs the prison staff to obtain an employment position to help her children outside. The latter need not only money from their mother, but also her agency to follow-up on legal actions, for example. Maria's trials, in turn, are monitored through legal assistance services from the prison unit. For this reason, she and her friends use each other's temporary releases to check what is happening. When one leaves for seven days, she takes all the information regarding the trials of the other women to go to the Court of Justice and oversee the situation of all of them. The news arrives when the inmate returns to the Piep.

Another complex arrangement, cited by three prisoners who presented this type of figuration, is what happens when these women are in a semi-open regime with outside work. Inside the unit, they are permitted just one set of clothes for the outside work. When they leave to work, they remove the prison uniform to use these clothes, which are held by the penitentiary agents. However, just one set is considered insufficient for them to be able to work five days a week. Also, they cannot leave at the entrance other items, like mobile phones, that they use during the day. To get round these restrictions, the interviewees related a strategy that depends on the collaboration between inmates.

Liliane recounted that she and other prisoners in the same work regime rented an apartment near to the Piep and left their things there every day before returning to the prison. It was in this space that they washed their clothes, took showers and got dressed for work. The other two interviewees in this regime spoke of similar arrangements, with the difference that one of them said that the place was owned by one of the inmates, who allowed it to be used for free.

The basic characteristic of figurations Type 3 is the entanglement of prison networks with family networks so that everyday problems of survival (of the inmates and their family members) can be resolved. Furthermore, the arrangements necessary and possible differ according to prison regimes, which further complexifies the formation of their networks.

Rethinking the thesis of family abandonment through the figuration networks

The three types of figurations presented show how imprisoned women continue to be part of the family circle. In some cases, they maintain a central role in the survival of family members, who are themselves no less important than the survival of these women. If there are fewer visits and less support for women in prison compared to men, this should not be attributed solely to the higher moral judgment to which female convicts are subject. It is also necessary to consider the reorganization of the families following the imprisonment of women who were very often central to the family group.

The interviewees who presented figuration Type 1, as well as not having been abandoned by their family members, reported broad support provided to them by their relatives. The woman who described a figuration Type 2 already lacked strong affective-family ties before her incarceration and thus prison cannot be identified as the reason for her isolation from her relatives. Finally, the women who presented figuration Type 3 also did not reveal any abandonment, but rather difficulties in the reorganization of the family network following the imprisonment of the woman, who was central to its dynamics. In this case, the inmate continues to endeavour to ensure that family networks are not eroded by the absence of financial resources, due to the capture of some of its members by the Criminal Justice System and even by the progression of the prison regime. The mutual support of other inmates to get round the privations imposed on the woman, her children and other loved ones is indispensable for their survival inside and outside the prison unit.

Final considerations

The sociology of prisons is a rapidly expanding field in Brazil, although research on male dynamics tend to dominate in terms of quantity and spread of their findings (LOURENÇO and ALVAREZ, 2017). The growing emphasis on the dynamics of female incarceration in contemporary Brazilian studies has repeated in unison that once women are imprisoned, they are abandoned and forgotten by their families (CERNEKA, 2009; SOUZA, 2016). This evaluation identifies as factors the condemnation of criminal female behavior (LEMGRUBER, 1999; SOARES, 2002) and the fact that visits tend to be understood as an outcome of gender roles (SILVESTRE, 2012; GODOI, 2015) and thus a function exclusive to women (DUARTE, 2013). For these reasons, supposedly, female prisoners are less visited than incarcerated men.

When we analyzed the networks of relations of female inmates in the main prison unit of Minas Gerais, we verified that the abandonment reported in previous studies does not seem to be part of the dynamic of these women. Or not to the extent that the literature has mentioned (LEMGRUBER, 1999; SOARES, 2002, LOURENÇO, 2015). Female inmates may be forgotten by their partners, who end up breaking the amorous relationship months after imprisonment

(CERNEKA, 2009). Understanding whether there is a higher abandonment of women in terms of amorous or sexual relations compared to male prisoners, however, was not our aim, since this would require another methodological approach, ideally comparing male and female prison units.

Within our aim of ascertaining whether women maintain their affective ties and how they obtain items of survival not provided by the Piep, we observed that the figurations of which they were part before incarceration. These networks, that involve in particular their mothers and children, are reinforced and maintained during the inmate's incarceration, including through the sending of goods into prison and money outside of it. The continuity of the woman's connection with her family can be explained by the influence of traditional gender roles, which confer them with the role of mothers and caregivers as conceived by Bales and Parsons (1956). This burden falls on the interviewees since they did not relinquish the traditional division of roles (which attributes women the care of home and children) as determined also by the class position of the inmates.

As highlighted by Angela Davis (2003, 2011), it is impossible to understand the prison system without considering the intersection of race, gender and socioeconomic condition. The selectivity of the Criminal Justice System ends up taking poor women to prison and increases the difficulties that their families need to face on the outside. The financial situation of the family members is felt also by the inmate, who is unable to make calls due to a lack of phone credit or does not receive visits because her family cannot afford bus fares. To overcome the economic shortfall, in most cases, an entangled arrangement of networks inside and outside the prison universe is necessary. It is this entanglement that will ensure the survival of the inmates and their families. This arrangement is represented especially by figuration Type 3, the most common among female prisoners.

Those family units that manage to reorganize their lives without the woman's money make themselves present on visiting days. On the other hand, if the visit harms the family's revenues, family members will send goods via postal service so that the inmate does not lack any of the items she needs to make craftwork. Meanwhile the money acquired from the sale of these products is used to buy goods that the inmate needs (such as more craftwork material, soaps, shampoos, cigarettes and so on) and also helps to maintain the family.

Thus, the higher or lower intensity of exchanges with the outside environment has a prominent role in the figurations that will angle power games inside and outside the Piep. In the majority of situations, it is unlikely that the woman will be left to her own luck inside the prison system. This will happen only if she had no network of support before her imprisonment. For those female inmates who are embedded in networks of affect, abandonment is not the best word to describe their experiences in prison.

Notes

[1] Study carried out with the support of Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de Minas Gerais (Fapemig) (APQ-01648-16).

[2] The law creating this prison unit dates from 1948, but only it was only in 1956, under the government of Bias Fortes, that the penitentiary was effectively inaugurated.

[3] The acronym refers to the name that the unit acquired in 1991, the Penitenciária Industrial Estevão Pinto. The nickname is used still today by people who work or are imprisoned there.

[4] Research approved by the Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Minas Gerais (CAAE: 84242418.4.0000.5149).

[5] According to Mariner and Cavallaro (1998, p. 29), the prison regime progression in Brazil can be described as follows: "first, the sentencing judge should consider the defendant's individual circumstances in imposing the sentence. Thus, for example, the question of whether a prisoner is a recidivist or a first-time offender is relevant in deciding whether he is sentenced to a closed prison, to an open facility, or to community service. Second, the judge of penal execution should continually monitor the prisoner's case while he is imprisoned, adjusting the terms of sentence according to the prisoner's conduct. Normally, a prisoner who begins his sentence in a closed prison should, after he has served part of his sentence, be transferred to a semi-open facility and from there, after further time has passed, to an open facility, and finally to release into society. In sum, this view of incarceration sees it as a dynamic process, not simply a fixed term of years." It means that a detainee sentenced to 30 years of imprisonment should be held in closed regime for 10 years, then transferred to a semi-open regime for 10 years and finally released in a system similar to parole. The laws approved in the last 30 years changed this system, making these detainees serve most of their sentences in closed regime.

[6] Code of Criminal Procedure, article 295: "When imprisoned prior to final conviction, the following shall be held in shelters or special prisons at the disposal of the competent authority: VII – those with degrees from any of the higher education institutions of Brazil".

[7] The workshops in which the questionnaires were administered were those for craftwork, sewing, jewellery making and graphic design. During this stage of the research, bag manufacturing and biscuit making workshops were also being run at the locality, but these were not accessible due to the veto of the coordinators of these activities.

[8] The legislation ruling on the presence of children and adolescents up to the age of 18 in prison units stipulates that they must be accompanied by a responsible adult. In the case of many of the children of inmates, however, legal guardianship is held by the mothers in prison and the law does not explain who would be capable of being 'responsible' in these cases. The Minas Gerais Prison Administration Office and the Piep have an agreement through which exceptions are made to this rule on specific weekends, such as the week of Mother's Day.

[9] In the case of soaps, the prison offers a sodium soap, generally used in the outside world to wash clothes.

[10] According to the survey data, 25% of prisoners had jobs, but only 16.6% were performing a remunerated activity at the time of the interview.

[11] A period of seven days that inmates in the semi-open regime have the right to spend at home five times a year.

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