

### Women's prison and its effects: Gender, care and family

### *A prisão feminina e seus afetos: Gênero, cuidado e família*

### *La prisión femenina y sus afectos: Género, cuidado y familia*

### *La prison féminine et ses affections: Genre, soins et famille*

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#### Abstract

*The policy of mass incarceration is a reality that has been increasingly reiterated. When it comes to female incarceration, specifically, Brazil ranks third in the world. In this work, we analyze, based on cartographic research, how the punitive system of deprivation and restriction of freedom affects women who are subject to imprisonment and also how it affects their family support networks. Based on what emerged from work carried out in a women's prison unit in Rio de Janeiro, through discussion groups with female prisoners, we wrote considerations about what they brought regarding the affections constructed and reconstructed inside and outside the prison, generally in the form of family ties. In this sense, based on the narratives of these women, we seek to give visibility to the formation and maintenance of emotional relationships as an essential means of preserving their lives. Permeated by anguish, violations, and latent faults of deprivation or restriction of freedom, these intra and extramural relationships are pointed out as survival strategies and as lines of escape, a possibility of creating fissures in the rigid prison institution, as well as of being in prison in other ways.*

**Keywords:** prison, women, families, affections, care, gender

#### Resumo

A política de encarceramento em massa é uma realidade que vem sendo cada vez mais reiterada. Em se tratando do encarceramento feminino, especificamente, o Brasil ocupa o terceiro lugar no *ranking* mundial. Neste trabalho, analisamos, a partir de uma pesquisa cartográfica, como o sistema punitivo de privação e restrição de liberdade incide sobre as mulheres que são sujeitas ao aprisionamento, bem como afetam suas redes de apoio familiares. A partir do que emergiu de um trabalho realizado em uma unidade prisional feminina no Rio de Janeiro, através de rodas de conversa com mulheres presas, tecemos considerações acerca do que elas trouxeram a respeito dos afetos construídos e reconstruídos dentro e fora da prisão, em geral no formato de vínculos familiares. Nesse sentido, a partir das narrativas dessas mulheres, buscamos dar visibilidade às conformações e manutenções das relações afetivas como meio essencial de

preservação de suas vidas. Permeadas por angústias, violações e faltas latentes da privação ou restrição de liberdade, essas relações intra e extramuros são apontadas como estratégias de sobrevivência e como linhas de fuga, possibilidade de criarem fissuras na rígida instituição prisional, bem como de estarem na prisão de outras formas.

**Palavras-chave:** prisão, mulheres, famílias, afetos, cuidado, gênero

### **Resumen**

*La política de encarcelamiento en masa es una realidad que viene siendo cada vez más reiterada. En el caso del encarcelamiento femenino, específicamente, el Brasil ocupa el tercer lugar en el ranking mundial. En este trabajo, analizamos, a partir de una investigación cartográfica, cómo el sistema punitivo de privación y restricción de libertad incide sobre las mujeres que son sujetas al encarcelamiento, como también afectan sus redes familiares de apoyo. A partir de lo que surgió de una unidad penitenciaria femenina en el Rio de Janeiro, por medio de charlas con mujeres preseas, tejemos consideraciones acerca de lo que ellas trajeron a respecto de los afectos construidos y reconstruidos dentro y fuera de la cárcel, en general en el formato de vínculos familiares. En este sentido, a partir de las narrativas de estas mujeres, buscamos dar visibilidad a las conformaciones y mantenimientos de las relaciones afectivas como medio esencial de preservación de sus vidas. Permeados por angustias, violaciones y faltas latentes de la privación o restricción de la libertad, estas relaciones intra y extra muros son apuntadas como estrategias de supervivencia y como líneas de escape, posibilidad de crear grietas en la rígida institución penitenciaria, como también de estar en la prisión de otras formas.*

**Palabras clave:** prisión, mujeres, familias, afectos, cuidado, género.

### **Résumé**

*La politique d'incarcération de masse est une réalité de plus en plus réitérée. En ce qui concerne l'incarcération des femmes, en particulier, le Brésil se classe au troisième rang mondial. Dans ce travail, nous analysons, à travers une recherche cartographique, comment le système punitif de privation et de restriction de liberté affecte les femmes incarcérées, ainsi que leurs réseaux de soutien familial. À partir des résultats d'un travail mené dans une unité pénitentiaire pour femmes à Rio de Janeiro, à travers des cercles de conversation avec des détenues, nous tissons des réflexions sur les affections construites et reconstruites à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur de la prison, généralement sous la forme de liens familiaux. En ce sens, à partir des récits de ces femmes, nous cherchons à mettre en lumière les conformations et le maintien des relations affectives comme moyen essentiel de préserver leur vie. Imprégnées d'angoisse, de violations et d'absences latentes liées à la privation ou à la restriction de liberté, ces relations intra et extramuros sont signalées comme des stratégies de survie et comme des lignes de fuite, permettant de créer des fissures dans l'institution carcérale rigide et d'envisager d'autres manières d'être en prison.*

**Mots-clés:** prison, femmes, familles, affections, soins, genre.

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The mass incarceration policy in Brazil, which makes us oscillate between the third and fourth place in prison population in the world, violates the most basic human rights, produces poverty, inequalities, frays and destroys family ties. Necropolitics (Mbembe, 2018), installed by the State, is an important producer of subjectivity, reinforcing in the social imagination that lives do not matter. This concept highlights how the instruments of power engender the leaving and causing of death of some bodies, which helps us to think about the mechanisms that naturalize the presence of this part of the population in the penal system (Mbembe, 2018).

According to data from the National Survey of Prison Information - Women (INFOPEN Mulheres, Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2018), whose data refer to 2016, Brazil is the third country that imprisons the most women in the world, behind only the United States and Thailand. In addition, Brazil is the country that has increased the rate of imprisonment of women the most in recent decades, having shown a growth of 455% between 2000 and 2016. Also according to INFOPEN Mulheres (Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2018), incarcerated women are mostly black (62.5%) and have a low level of education: 45% of them have incomplete elementary education and only 1% have completed higher education.

These data are not new, nor surprising, since it is well known that part of the population is targeted by mass incarceration policies and selective penal processes – black and poor women. Thus, this profile took shape in the women who made up groups in an intervention research study carried out, every two weeks, in a semi-open women's unit of the Rio de Janeiro

prison system, from May to December 2018.

Prison affects their lives and those of their families intensely, and not just because they were incarcerated at the time. The fact that they were low-income women, predominantly black, and often living in favelas or peripheral areas, positioned them as potential inmates of the institution. Furthermore, their life stories, related to partners, siblings, and children, contributed to them becoming frequent visitors or, at the very least, quite familiar with the institutional environment.

While prison is still a social and material reality, it is essential that the rights of people deprived of their liberty are ensured. In this sense, we believe that one of the many political strategies for this is to publicize and raise awareness about what happens inside prisons, using research as an important tool.

We understand that it is up to us, based on our professional practice, to make visible the resistance movements against the dehumanization of the prison system as we contribute, as an academic, to the formulation of both public policies and daily practices in prison institutions. As Baratta (2011) inspires us, the fight for a democratic and egalitarian society is inseparable from the fight to overcome the penal system.

This text deals with the work experience of a group of professors and students of the Psychology course at the State University of Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil, carried out for seven months in a women's prison unit in Rio de Janeiro, whose objective was to discuss issues of gender, sexuality and family. Using cartography (Passos et al., 2009) as the theoretical and methodological framework for the work, we aim to discuss how the punitive system of deprivation and restriction of freedom affects women who are subject to imprisonment, as well as their family support networks.

### **And This Is How We Build Our Work**

We entered the prison system through a program run by the Psychology Coordination Department of the State Penitentiary Administration Secretariat (SEAP), which offers activities in prison units. We would like to emphasize that all ethical procedures were adopted to protect the people *we work with*<sup>1</sup>. Instead of giving lectures, which is the main idea of the project, we prefer to work with discussion groups.

The circles were held weekly, however, as our group was large, we split into two, so that each of us was there every two weeks. For many weeks we were able to invite the same women, which provided continuity for the work always carried out with the same people. Thus, we worked in parallel with two groups, each composed of a relative number of eight women from the system, one teacher and four students. All the names of the participants mentioned throughout this article are fictitious, to guarantee the confidentiality of the participants.

We tried to make the participants feel as comfortable as possible, considering the limitations of working in a prison unit, and considering the fantasies and expectations that could be generated by the fact that we are a psychology team. In order to facilitate environments for active listening and exchange, we used music, poems, drawings and stories as triggers, allowing opinions, feelings, positions and affections to emerge and expand in such a difficult context, amid the harsh confines of prison.

What we planned for the activities did not always actually happen, and this movement is a living part of what we understand as intervention research (Rocha & Aguiar, 2013). In the cartographic way of doing research (Passos et al., 2009), we collectively reconstructed our proposals and conducted the activities always based on what emerged in and from the group. The longing they felt for home and family outside the walls, the tensions related to the length of their sentence, the possibility or impossibility of accessing the so-called "benefits" – rights that become currency in prison – or the treatment they received from the prison guards were themes proposed by them: latent anxieties of deprivation of liberty. With this theoretical-methodological framework, we proposed to follow the existential territories that we were composing and producing with them in our meetings, understanding that in this process we affect and are affected.

We discussed the most diverse family structures, always intertwined with race, gender and sexuality devices. The group of women varied at times throughout the weeks – sometimes some were unable or unwilling to go, sometimes a new inmate showed up. In general, there were about eight women of different ages, from 19, 20, to close to 70, recognized as elderly inmates.

We believe in transversality as a guide for our practices, considering that prison, university, and femininity affect us and permeate our lives. According to Guattari (1986, p. 96), "transversality is a dimension that aims to overcome two impasses, that of pure verticality and that of simple horizontality; it tends to be achieved when maximum communication is achieved between the different levels and, above all, between the different senses". The different places we occupy in the prison space, ours, by choice, and theirs, compulsory, were constantly under analysis.

Our visits to the women's prison unit usually took place, due to scheduling coincidence, on the same day as custody, when food, hygiene products, medicines, belongings and the like are distributed to the prison unit by families for relatives deprived of their liberty. This material is inspected by officers at the entrance to the unit and generally occurs on a day of

<sup>1</sup> This research was approved by the Study Center of the School of Penitentiary Management and obtained authorization from the judge of the Criminal Enforcement Court so that it could take place.

the week other than the day of the family visit. Visits to the units require time and money from families that many do not have. The custody products, called “scrap” by the inmates, must comply with the unit’s strict rules and undergo inspection by prison officers before reaching them (or not) within the prison walls.

As we approached the gate, we often came across women carrying bags, waiting to be seen and received by the unit. At these entrances, we noticed the contrast in access and treatment by the system. In general, we entered without any major complications, informing at the entrance that we belonged to the State University of Rio de Janeiro and a document that was left at the unit’s reception desk proved that we had completed the bureaucratic processes for approval to work. The procedure for our entry into the unit was not rigid, it allowed for some adaptability according to the institution’s own flaws and dynamics, and it could be more or less meticulous, depending on the situation, we never really understood why. We left our belongings in a small room where the security guards, who open the gate were, entering the institution with only papers, pencils, pens, and the material necessary for the activity.

Furthermore, the permissiveness and malleability that we could have had with us was not repeated in the inmates’ accounts regarding their family members. They would wait for hours at the prison gate and often had their belongings withheld or discarded – sometimes under the justification of rules that had never been introduced or that were merely circulated by “word of mouth” and that changed without prior notice. They were treated rudely and were often humiliated, feeling “as if they were also criminals” – a point that will be discussed later. The power games were much more pronounced, sometimes violent and, certainly, with less room for negotiation.

On certain occasions, our expectations were frustrated and our anxieties heightened, especially when we were denied access to the unit. This occurred due to the carrying out of “General” searches – a term used to describe the searches carried out in cases of complaints related to the presence of cell phones or drugs in cells – as well as health inspections, pest control or other activities in the areas where we usually performed our duties.

Even after entering the unit, we were often forgotten while waiting for women who did not arrive. In those moments, it was possible to experience in our bodies a small part of neglect and indifference to which inmates deprived of liberty are subjected intensely and daily. We are women who dedicate ourselves to a part of society that should not be talked about, to which we should not dedicate anything, not even time. In this sense, being forgotten meant disregarding the space that we built as a right for these women.

Our practice is not designed from the perspective of security, the prison system’s main concern, and which affects us when it takes us months to get authorization to enter the units or when they question us because they believe that, by choosing to act in this way, we would not recognize the importance of the work of the **prison officers**<sup>2</sup> who become ill, including mentally, because they are there, feeling disqualified by us. We often hear phrases from professionals in the unit that suggest that we know nothing about the reality of prisons and that it is easy to be deceived by the people who are there.

The effort in our intervention group and in our contact with women has always been to make room for differences, whether in perspective, affectations or ways of being or existing in the world, highlighting our own. Our differences in skin color, education and social class, of the majority of our team, often produced, on their part, the need for answers that they believed would please us. However, our similarities and differences also produced approximations and curiosities, paths in the construction of a common ground. Kastrup and Passos (2013) point to the production of this common plan that brings together the diversities thought of as a creative power, and bets on communication between heterogeneous singularities and the collective construction of knowledge. Thus, our meetings were affectionate, we all anxiously awaited the next ones, and trust was renewed each time.

At the end of each workday, one of us was responsible for the field diary, which was shared on a *google drive* with the group, without data that could identify the women. The record was, at the same time, a memory of what happened, a catharsis, an opportunity to rethink the interventions, responses, interactions, and a way for everyone to follow the work. We understand the field diary as a mobile tool, which can be written with different layers formed over time. Rereading it always promotes other thoughts, understandings, and requires rewriting because time brings us distance that allows us to illuminate other points.

For Nascimento and Lemos (2020, p. 241), the field diary is an instrument that historicizes and records the experience, therefore it is fundamental to put the events under analysis; a “writing of multiple readings”. The field diary accompanied us on our travels, which were many and intense, marked by affection.

### Among Many Affections

The relationships of affection established in an institution as harsh as prison are also forms of resistance and enable the construction and maintenance of bonds between subjects who are often dehumanized. Padovani (2016, p. 20) states that

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<sup>2</sup> Although the change in nomenclature from prison agents to prison police officers occurred after the time of the research – albeit in the same year –, we chose to use the nomenclature current in 2023, the year the article was submitted.

emotional bonds are “bonds nurtured by the maintenance of the hard journey in prison”. They are created and recreated by sharing essential substances for the preservation of life, ranging from food and personal hygiene items to exchanges of affection, dreams and latent anxieties. As the author highlights, in this complex web of relationships, bonds are woven from the recognition of one another, who they can trust and with whom they should ally themselves, and from whom they should distrust and keep a certain distance (Padovani, 2016). Confined in the same space, they give the possible tones to these relationships without interruption. In this sense, networks of affection and care are established as a means of resistance to the forces that dehumanize and oppress them within a system governed by necropolitics (Mbembe, 2018) that manages their deaths.

Although fear and distrust are strong in the prison environment and often prevent people from getting closer and engaging in more intimate relationships, prison is also a possible place to build solid friendships that go beyond the walls and time spent in prison, as well as marital and/or sexual relationships with varying intensities and durations that can even be carried out in everyday life as ways to survive prison.

Rafaela and Laura, participants in the group, maintained a strong friendship. They knew each other before prison and say they will certainly maintain their friendship after they are released. The relationship between the two even helps Laura in her moments of anger: “I feel a lot of hate. Sometimes the hate is so great that I think about strangling someone. All of this is because of the things I have experienced in prison” (Field diary, 12/06/2018).

In an activity with a group of women from the elderly cell – a specific cell in this unit where women over 50 years of age and/or who have health problems, such as back problems, mobility difficulties, among others, are held – we learn the story of Catarina, a woman who, as a result of episodes of aggression against her, suffered two strokes and was left with half of her body paralyzed. We are told that she cannot take a shower alone, drink coffee, or clean her cell because one of her arms is immobilized, in addition to other after-effects, and that the other women in the cell take turns dressing her, feeding her, cleaning the space in her place and helping her with everything they can in her daily life. One of Catarina's cellmates says: “We have to support each other. We are prisoners, we are human beings, we are not animals.”

Romantic relationships established with other women, whether temporary or not, also generate feelings and sensations of various kinds, such as guilt, repulsion, and pleasure. In this sense, there are several complex crossings that permeate their intramural histories, religious formations and beliefs, and their family compositions. In one of the situations we witnessed:

Bárbara appears extremely apprehensive and guilty because, according to her, she is “falling into temptation” since she is in a relationship with a cellmate and “in the eyes of God it is not well regarded”, but she emphasizes that she knows that this will pass. She says that she is committing “pederasty” and reports that she feels confused because she has children and grandchildren outside and that she does not want to “make mistakes” for her daughter anymore. She believes that she “died spiritually” after she began this relationship inside and says that now she feels dirty when she talks to God. (Field diary, 05/22/2018)

These relationships, which are initially considered companionship and/or conjugal relationships, can often be quite violent. Bell Hooks (2013) reminds us that intimacy and affection can coexist with domination in a relationship marked by a hierarchy of power. As the author highlights when discussing relationships of oppression in their disguises between white women and their black employees, “even in the context of a situation of exploitation, bonds of affection can emerge even in the face of domination” (Hooks, 2013, p. 134).

Although Bell Hooks (2013) works from a different context, her considerations regarding these apparently opposing but coexisting affections seemed close to what some of the women we met told us. The emotional and/or material cost in a loving relationship is noticeable from Barbara's story.

Bárbara confided in us that the woman she was in a relationship with was “sucking” her dry, because she had to share everything that came to her through her family, and she ended up giving her products “so as not to cause trouble.” She also reported that she was putting up with this situation because she didn't want to start a fight in the cell and was embarrassed to appear hurt in front of her daughter. (Field Diary, 05/22/2018)

Later, in another meeting, Bárbara revealed that she was managing to keep her distance from this relationship after leaving the suite, as they call the space occupied by a mattress next to the cell's bathroom, where she slept with the woman she was in a relationship with, and had started sleeping with a friend in another bed. She asked this friend not to let her “have another relapse”.

This story, as well as others shared in the activities, highlights the phrase repeated by many of the women: “Being married in prison means paying for two sentences.” It is said in relation to the conflicts, disputes and violence that make up romantic relationships and that are, at times, intensified by the intense and constant coexistence imposed by confinement. If on the one hand the phrase highlights the burden of living in prison, on the other, conjugal experience can make the time more palatable, offering moments of pleasure, love and affection.

In another meeting, Renata shared with us that she suffered a lot in prison, that she lost family members while she was deprived of her freedom and that this generated emotions that were very difficult to deal with. However, she met a very special partner in prison and, “it doesn’t matter that she is a woman”, she says, because the relationship allows her to survive and build perspectives for the future there, outlining plans for when prison becomes just a memory. She tells us, emotionally, that they intend to get married when they get out, live together and have children.

Although guards often facilitate the couple’s coexistence and **resolution no. 558<sup>3</sup>** of the Penitentiary Administration Secretariat (SEAP/RJ) recognizes same-sex couples in relationships between those inside and outside the prison and in the flow of visits, allowing intimate visits in article 8, this does not automatically translate into the creation of a visitor’s card, which requires formal proof of ties that, due to historical processes of discrimination, are much more difficult to prove and formalize, nor does it prevent discrimination and other types of violence in everyday life.

Thinking about the flow of affections within and across prison walls implies thinking about and making visible the potential of encounters and resistance movements in the face of the harshness and attempts at dehumanization inherent to the deprivation of liberty. But it also requires monitoring the institutional processes that guarantee respect for these relationships and the right to emotional coexistence. In this context of violence, disputes, suppression of rights, crimes and penal articles, relationships of care between professionals and inmates are also possible.

Even before we met Ingrid, we had already heard her name echoing in our meetings and in the corridors of the institution, always with a tone of affection and gratitude – even when the topic was her ear-pulling. We heard about how she offered listening and support, both emotionally and bureaucratically, while at the same time never giving up on being firm and rigorous, being respected by everyone. Ingrid was one of the prison officers we met along the way and showed us the importance of thinking of prison officers as a heterogeneous group and how this group is in fact crossed, like all of us, by the social logic that demands punishment.

During our meetings, the women expressed affection for the people who entered the prison and carried out various activities with them. At these times, they included us in their networks of affection and care. They spoke of us as people who gave them “a humanized look”, different from how society usually sees and treats them. When we took a long time to return, usually for some bureaucratic reason, they said that they had missed us and asked us not to abandon them. This affection was shared by our group and felt with the trust that was built throughout the meetings.

Carla talked about a project carried out in a closed unit, where the women in the unit decided to donate part of their hair to children with cancer and the repercussion it generated when it was publicized by the media. There were several derogatory comments on social media, such as “now they want to act like good girls”, questioning their character and the motivation behind this action. Due to this daily discrimination, Carla gets emotional when highlighting the importance of the open listening space that we facilitate and, above all, our humanized view of them, which, according to her, differs from the majority. (Field diary, 07/17/2018)

These criticisms highlight how the process of dehumanization suffered by a portion of the population incarcerated has been consolidated in the social imaginary. In general, these people are stigmatized and labeled as individuals of “bad character,” not capable of “recovery,” and who therefore deserve to suffer and remain on the margins of society. This dehumanization, in turn, is also racialized. Fanon (1968) points out that notions such as “good behavior” or “good person” are historically constructed categories, in which black people are considered bad citizens in essence. In this sense, racism is what produces the high percentages of black bodies in prison, which we can understand as a legacy of slavery (Flauzina, 2006), as well as circulating in the imaginary that these are “irredeemable” people.

Our bonds were also seen as a possibility of preserving their lives, since, in addition to valuing the space for openness (albeit restricted) and the acceptance of multiple feelings that emerged in and from the meetings, they asked us for help in accessing basic rights. The requests were varied and reflect the neglect to which they are subjected, such as obtaining legal information about their cases or about their loved ones and even giving them news, being able to get books from the library, basic hygiene *kits*, notebooks to write their stories to endure and resist in prison.

### **Prison Family: More of the Same?**

Family is an ever-present topic in prison settings. It brings up longing, guilt, idealization, and the suppression of rights. Women talk about moments in their lives with their mothers and fathers, about the importance of visits from them and other family members; they talk about the families they have formed throughout their lives, their children, grandchildren, or even the families that are formed there based on the relationships of affection, companionship, and identification among women prisoners, the so-called “prison families.”

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<sup>3</sup> For a better understanding of the treatment of the LGBT population in the prison system and visitation, we suggest reading resolutions 558 and 584 of SEAP/RJ.

Some authors, such as Zaffaroni (1993 cited by Leite, 2014), understand that the main function of the penal system is the destruction of horizontal relationships. In this sense, we believe that the formation of “prison families” is a form of resistance, a way of circumventing this rigorous and punitive system that is usually authoritarian and vertical. These “prison families” tend to be configured only in female units and are “mother-daughter” or “grandmother-granddaughter” relationships, among others. These nomenclatures set the dominant family model in motion, showing us that it is possible to draw lines of escape, making other uses of the language that usually oppresses them (Huthmacher, 2011).

Aline said that she was Carla's grandmother, and explained that sometimes they identify with another prisoner, and these bonds are generally formed from relationships of care for each other; of concern, of attention, and that sometimes they spontaneously began to call each other “mother”, “daughter”. (Field diary, 07/31/2018)

However, these relationships can also be formed as survival or protection strategies when, for example, one defends the other in a fight, gives advice on various topics, or the group shares, even with those who do not receive visitors, the goods received from families, such as hygiene products.

Prison families are built based on affinities and identifications. In some cases, older women end up adopting younger women as daughters, in an attempt to curb attitudes that could be harmful to themselves, such as, for example, “getting a share”, which is a punishment that can mean regression of regime, loss of benefits, and increased prison time.

The feelings that are found in the prison space are fluid, intense, constructed and reconstructed as the system itself moves women deprived of their liberty through different units or different cells in the same prison unit. In many situations, the intensification of compulsory coexistence and demonstrations of power/control of one over the other give rise to conflicts and can mean the breaking of these bonds, whether marital or family – with similarities and differences to what happens outside the prison walls. A motherhood or a grand-motherhood can be dissolved – with more pain, less conflict, depending on the situation.

Natália, for example, told us about the dissolution of the bond with her “ex-prison mother,” a 74-year-old woman. They both slept in the cell, classified as a cell for the elderly, and Natália said that her mother's control began to bother her.

In this way, the family bonds built in prison appear not only as a line of escape but also demonstrate the tensions that emerge from these relationships, which can lead to hard lines. They also spoke about the emotional and material cost that these relationships can generate. In addition to the donations and sharing of scrap metal – as items delivered to custody are called –, the sharing of pain and suffering places an emotional burden that, when added together, can become unsustainable. Natália also calls this experience of emotional closeness “taking or paying for two sentences”. In both cases, these are very intense relationships.

Angélica was already at the end of her sentence. She told the group that she had adopted a daughter, hugging her while her daughter smiled, making us understand that she accepted the explanation that was coming. As a young girl, her daughter had been caught with a cell phone in her cell and her “prison was almost closed” – which means to say, she had to regress in regime. However, she returned to that unit after a month, but her concern about her “youthful impulses” made Angélica feel overwhelmed, acting like her mother and giving her advice that ranged from teaching her how to wash her own clothes and take care of her belongings, to teaching her to stay calmer, to be more focused, to live better in a group and to avoid getting into conflicts that could harm her.

Strong bonds, a certain duty of obedience, the idea of care and protection are characteristics that grant the status of family relationships to some relationships established between inmates, producing formats that do not necessarily shape their relationships outside the unit.

It is interesting to think that, in this sense, quite traditional relationships are established and that they can be completely broken, with or without violence, with or without resentment, and sometimes as quickly as they are established. If, on the one hand, it is the strength and naturalization of family relationships that constitute them and name them in this way, on the other, they call for a dissolution that is somehow incompatible with these bonds, from a formal point of view. If, on the one hand, the presence of tradition shapes family relationships to the point where they do not exist, on the other, it is through this naming that their affective relationships shine through, a transgressive way of living despite the violence of prison.

### **The Family That Doesn't Eat Lunch Together Every Day<sup>4</sup>**

Prison has long been a women's thing, with a considerable increase in incarceration, as we saw at the beginning of the text. However, the invisibility to which women's units are subjected prevents their specific needs from being met. Many of them report the lack of basic resources, including a lack of sanitary pads, increasing menstrual poverty, specific and humane medical care (there are many reports of abuse or obstacles on the way to and during medical care outside the unit),

<sup>4</sup> Allusion to the song by Titãs, *Família* (Bellotto & Antunes, 1987).

information and assistance for their family members who suffer from the effects of social distancing, often depending on state subsidies to survive.

In the dominant patriarchal society, women's bodies are expected to be docile and passive in the face of systems of oppression. As Boiteux (2018, p. 358) highlights, as a consequence of the penal system having the patriarchal system as one of its structuring bases, there is a:

(...) structural invisibility of female offenders, both in official data and in debates and in the development of public policies; and also, the reinforcement of the double punishment imposed on women.

In one of the conversations, one of the inmates emphasized that “for women, everything is more difficult. Men have more privileges than women.” Although the inmate did not elaborate much on her speech, one of the possible ways of understanding this statement could be the denial of the minimum structure to receive women. In addition to the aforementioned lack of basic supplies, it is observed that certain rights of people deprived of liberty, which are rarely guaranteed to men and, when guaranteed, are often perceived as privileges, are even less discussed in the context of women, as is the case of the right to receive partners for intimate visits in the prison unit, for example. The work to reduce the sentence, although scarce, is inside the prison for women, in the kitchen or cleaning (Löwenhaupt, 2019), without pay or chance of employment<sup>5</sup> upon leaving, although we know that this destination is quite rare. Another point often understood as a privilege is visits, which are more frequent for men, as highlighted in the work of Lermen and Silva (2018), an ethnography carried out with men who visit women.

Since racism is also the structuring basis of the penal system and, in fact, since most of the women incarcerated are black women, the antithesis of masculinity and whiteness, they are assigned a (non)place of even greater invisibility and subordination, as the other of the “other”, being unable to be recognized as subjects (Ribeiro, 2016). In this sense, Grada Kilomba (2019) draws attention to the importance of talking about gendered racism, that is, one that encompasses racist perceptions of gender that differ from what is attributed to white women, with black women historically seen as naturally aggressive, more resistant to pain, outside the standard of dominant femininity and, therefore, being even more objectified and subjugated. All these factors point to the urgency of specific prison policy proposals for women (mostly black and poor), which consider their demands, based on the realities they experience, which are already well known.

Some of the inmates we met at the facility had the Periodic Home Visit (PHV) benefit, which grants prisoners permission to temporarily leave the institution to go to their family's home on specific holidays: Christmas, Easter, Father's Day, Mother's Day and Children's Day. The benefit, when granted, allows them to return home for a period of one week with their families and is intended to guarantee the right to family life. Women in semi-open regime who did not have the PHV reported great anguish while waiting for this benefit.

Natália has already prepared to leave PHV twice, once on Father's Day and once on Children's Day. The first time, they told her that she would need to take a criminal examination. The second time, even though she had already taken it, when the day arrived, once again she was not called to leave, claiming that her examination was not registered. Natália is upset and apprehensive about not being able to exercise this right, reporting that she needs to resolve issues related to the death of her parents and her desire to see her daughter and granddaughter again, who is sick. (Field diary, 11/13/2018)

The PHV is a time of great tension and emotional intensity. The fact that many of them live far away and have small children makes them afraid of not returning to the prison after the visit, which would make their situation even worse. They describe the way they experience these visits as a time of great intensity and, at the same time, very painful, as they anticipate the anguish of separation that will occur again after seven days.

Amanda reports that when she sees her daughter, she doesn't want to go back to the unit. Carla says that the second time she went to PHV's house, her daughter didn't want to let her go, saying that the first time it took her a long time to see her again. (Field diary, 10/07/2018)

Some of them report that they have already been denied the benefit more than once, due to the financial and/or emotional costs that these visits demand. In addition to the suffering of reuniting with and having to be away from their family members again, the distance and cost of travel become another complicating factor or impediment to visiting their families. There are also those who do not have a family network that allows them to enjoy this benefit and therefore choose to only use the extramural work benefit (TEM) in the vicinity of the unit.

The stigma and the various effects of incarceration extend to family relationships, as we have stated, and appear, above all, when it comes to women, who are often more severely judged for having committed a crime, especially if they are mothers.

The anguish expressed by these women when they are separated from their family members, especially their children. During the conversations, many of the women express an atmosphere of great guilt and regret for having caused their family

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<sup>5</sup> For a more in-depth discussion on work and the penal system, see the work of Luiz Antônio Bogo Chies (e.g. Chies, 2013).

members suffering. Their separation culminates in a family reorganization and readaptation in which, in most cases, the children end up under the care of other women in the family, such as grandmothers, mothers-in-law or sisters. In the case of one of them, who reported that she had no family support, her children had to be sent to a shelter.

Many women express the feeling that they have failed as mothers and that they have not been “good examples” for their children, which often worsens their situation of vulnerability. In a dynamic in which we asked them to tell a story about a family, they said they were “bad examples” for their children, listing their involvement with crime, drugs and prostitution as justifications; while being a housewife and having a religion were identified as “good examples” and as the “right path” to follow. At various times, their children appear as the main motivators for enduring imprisonment and the conditions imposed on them and as incentives for them to “start over from scratch” in their lives. In this regard, during this meeting, Bianca reports that what prevents her from “kicking the bucket” are her children.

The romanticization of the relationship with children is inscribed in the way motherhood is naturalized, the result of transformations that allowed the establishment of modern states and the bourgeois economic order (Moura & Araújo, 2004). The idea of maternal instinct, so well developed by Elizabeth Badinter (2024), seems to still operate strongly. Added to this is the fact that any demonstration of weariness in relation to motherhood, disappointment or doubt can constitute sufficient grounds for the State to take children away.

Furthermore, many of the women who participated in the workshops demonstrated that they were the main providers of support for their children – emotionally and financially. This fact corroborates the worsening of the situation of vulnerability in which they find themselves when they are arrested, presenting material and mental overload, and the moralizing burden of guilt that they carry for being away from their homes.

This presence/ absence of family members can also be seen in the extent of the sentence imposed on the family, both due to the absence of that woman in daily life and in what needs to be provided, in terms of material goods, in the effort to travel for visits and custody deliveries, or even in the violence suffered by body searches and humiliations suffered. The extension of the punishment to family members, called by Comfort (2007, cited by Lago, 2017, p. 4) “secondary imprisonment”, occurs in various forms and at different psychological, social and financial levels. The stigmas that accompany the population deprived of liberty extend to their family members (Pereira, 2016), also labeled as people of bad conduct and dubious character (Lago, 2017). During our conversations, some women reported humiliations suffered by their families.

Amanda spoke about her children suffering because of a mistake she made in the past and talked about an episode in which a boy ridiculed her son at school, saying: “your father is a criminal”. Carla reported with great sadness that she no longer wants her daughter to visit her in prison because of the mistreatment she has already suffered during the visit. (Field diary, 10/07/2018)

It is important to emphasize that we are talking about families that live in precarious conditions and the separation of one of its members can mean, in addition to the emotional void, the scarcity of resources for survival. These effects on the family unit are viewed by society and the State with disdain, since they do not properly assist these families and enhance their zone of invisibility (Cabral & Medeiros, 2014).

This place of dehumanization or zone of non-being, a term present in the work of Franz Fanon (2008), is already imposed on these families, regardless of the restriction of freedom of one of its members. As Thula Pires (2018a) explains, the zone of non-being is imposed on black women, and other minority groups, by those who belong to the zone of being, that is, those who create the rules of the system and update its mechanisms that maintain this unequal order of power. In this sense, as Pires (2018b, p. 204) emphasizes,

The social groups that make up the prison population (non-white men and women, those with low levels of education, those who do not own property, etc.) and who are the most explicit portrayal of the processes of dehumanization that we endorse, are the same ones that, outside of prison, are disproportionately subjected to the effects of state violence and the dehumanizing hierarchies that constitute us as a society.

In this system of unequal power, prison as an institution reveals itself as “a kind of microscope of the entire society” (Pires, 2018b, p. 205), further reinforcing the condition of subordination and social exclusion of these groups belonging to the most disadvantaged social strata in terms of race, class and gender.

In one of our conversations, Sandra stated that many people are not prepared to leave prison. According to her, “it is more suffocating in prison, but what happens outside is what happens inside” (Field diary, 11/13/2018), further highlighting how social reproduction permeates institutions and maintains them.

In one of our meetings, Amanda and Ana shared personal experiences that marked these conditions of oppression to which they are subjected on a daily basis:

Amanda said that before she was arrested, the police surrounded her house and treated her very violently, even though she was breastfeeding her son. “As if I could run away in that situation,” she concluded. Ana also reported an episode of aggression by the police towards her son and husband, at the time they were arrested. She said that the police asked her son a provocative and derogatory questionnaire, asking things like “what marginal-looking hairstyle is this? and “what do you

want to be in life?” Her son could not keep quiet in that situation and one of the police officers threw a bicycle at him. She believes that because of this and because he saw his parents being attacked and taken to prison, her son grew up angry and has already attempted suicide. Today he is in a rehabilitation clinic, where she hopes he will remain for the remaining year of his sentence. (Field diary, 07/10/2018)

Faced with a context of extreme vulnerability, it is these families, often living in remote areas and without access to a formal and regular income, who, despite facing great difficulties, ensure that their incarcerated family members have a minimum of dignity within the prison system. Visits, in addition to being a means of maintaining emotional ties, are a way of providing basic resources that should be guaranteed by the State, such as hygiene items, clothing and even some medicines.

There is another task for families, who end up being the main source of monitoring of legal proceedings. As Cabral and Medeiros (2014) point out, these are people who are not in prison, generally women, but end up dealing with the prison system and keeping the machinery running. Therefore, women who do not receive visits or whose family members do not know that they are in prison occupy a position of even greater vulnerability and abandonment. This is the case with Elaine, who told us that she did not have a family network, which led to a lack of emotional and financial support, as well as guidance regarding her case and news about her children. Thus, she becomes more vulnerable to the disciplinary mechanisms of the system, causing more anxiety and suffering (Field diary, 06/05/2018).

### Final Considerations

Although prison is an environment thought of as predictable, there are practices that can be constructed as escape routes and change institutional dynamics, as we have shown so far. The maintenance and construction of networks of affection and care inside and outside prison are evident as an essential means of preserving the lives of people deprived of liberty, since the flow of subjective and material items essential to survival is only possible through these relationships. The affective relationships established in prison are practices of resistance.

The configuration of family relationships and multiple affections in women’s prisons can be seen as a possibility of breaking with the verticality established in prison, opening gaps for alliances as a survival strategy in the prison institution. It is the possibility of being in prison in other ways, besides being internal: they are mothers, friends, daughters, granddaughters, grandmothers, beyond the highly stigmatized and rigid category of “prisoner” that transcends the temporal and physical limits of prison.

The centrality of the family, which appears frequently in these women’s accounts, has a history. In discussions about social assistance and public policies, it is common to evoke familism, which, marked by disputes, is understood by Bonetti (2021, p. 63) as “an ideological perspective that takes the family entity as a central value and focus of public policies, particularly in the field of social protection”, which reinforces very traditional conceptions of gender and overloads women in the care role. Thus, the naturalization of the centrality of the family in social organization also has repercussions on these arrangements in the chain.

Imprisonment further increases the zone of invisibility and vulnerability of these women, who are mostly black, mothers, breadwinners and come from socioeconomically disadvantaged classes, as well as their families who depend on them. As Manuela Cunha (1994) says, the distance from family members and the disappearance of their references make incarcerated women “unsuitable beings”, as if they had lost their identities. According to Lago (2016, p. 174), these women “each in their own way constitute notions of family that contradict the notions of the justice system, but they do not fail to dialogue with roles and expectations assigned to women”.

At a time of pandemic, with the suspension of visits as a health measure to contain the spread of the coronavirus – and their return having been slow –, the lack of these affections as a condition of existence becomes even more evident, as does the State’s negligent and genocidal stance towards the needs of this population.

We believe that research processes in this area can contribute to making these realities more apparent, especially through the stories told by people who experience the conditions imposed by prison institutions in their own bodies. The narratives and analyses presented in this article highlight the urgency of developing specific public policies for women who are targets of incarceration policies and guaranteeing their rights that include their family networks. We believe that through the stories told by these women, permeated by pain, lack, violations and survival strategies, we can increase visibility about what happens to them, inside and outside prisons, and to their families who suffer the effects of “secondary imprisonment”.

It is also worth noting that it is precisely because of our disbelief in the criminal justice system, our understanding of it as a social problem that produces and reproduces systems of oppression such as racism and patriarchy, and of crime as a political phenomenon, that we advocate decarceration and the end of prisons, as well as the development of other conflict resolution strategies that are not based on a selective, vengeful and punitive logic and, consequently, do not include custodial sentences. However, while this design is not possible, we resist, whenever we can, making relationships of affection and life reverberate.

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