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Introduction

- 1 Parenthood is a gendered relation, but fatherhood and motherhood usually don't "do" gender in equivalent ways for men and women, that is, such roles and statuses do not have the same influence on how gender identity is socially conceptualized and performed: fatherhood tends to be more peripheral an attribute in men's conventional gender definitions than motherhood is in women's (Ortner, Whitehead, 1981).
- 2 Confinement situations not only reflect, but may even enhance this asymmetry. In this article we explore how, in prison, gender asymmetries are embodied in parenting, by focusing on how motherhood is connected to gender identity in the carceral context. Parenthood asymmetries such as the ones described above may be amplified by the way in which carceral institutions address gender differences. Prisons are gendered institutions where the space and organization themselves express a gender system which, in the case of women's prisons, prioritizes reproduction and domesticity over other dimensions (Cunha 1994; Palomar, 2004, 43). Secondly, asymmetries may be amplified both by women's discursive construction of gender and by prisoners' management of their stigmatized social identities. However, given that prisons reflect structural and historical variations, the very prominence of gender as an identity category may be highly contextual even in confinement situations (Cunha, 2013). Accordingly, mothering and motherhood may not only reveal different aspects but also be more or less emphasized in identity management and in the prison social scene. Based on field research carried out in three different periods within two Portuguese carceral settings, we will explore these variable aspects of motherhood, forms of relatedness and gender identity as they emerge in different imprisonment situations.
- 3 In the next section we present the methodology used and describe how two researches, conducted in different Portuguese carceral settings and in different periods, were combined for the purpose of this article. Subsequently, we address gender asymmetries in parenting relations behind bars, and explore the changes and continuities between past and present day gendered regimes that governed female prisons in Portugal. The analysis is twofold: first, we explore how mothering is enacted within and from prison, that is, when children stay with their mothers during imprisonment and when children are being taken care of on the outside. Second, highlighting the changes observed at different periods in the course of three decades, we analyse how the saliency of gender as a category of prisoners' identity may be highly contextual. Data show that while, in the 1980's, gender identity occupied the front stage of the prison scene, ten years later the prominence of gender would give way to a new sense of collective identity and forms of relatedness, associated with mass incarceration and the co-imprisonment of relatives. These contextual variations, nowadays mutually related, complexify the enactment of mothering in prison, and outline the variable role of motherhood in prisoners' identity and in carceral sociality.

1. Methodology

- 4 We will draw on fieldwork conducted at different times in the course of three decades, in two Portuguese carceral settings located in the country's main metropolitan areas: *Estabelecimento Prisional de Tires* (Tires hereon) and *Estabelecimento Prisional de Santa Cruz do Bispo* (Santa Cruz hereon). The first was created in 1954 in the outskirts of Lisbon but continues to be the major female penal institution in the country; the second opened in 2005 near the northern city of Oporto. Although these two penitentiaries are intended for a similar kind of penal population,¹ the contrast between their different historical origin and regional location allow for a more controlled grasp of the regularities and variations between them.

- 5 The fact that fieldwork in these two prisons was conducted by different researchers (one in each setting) and was driven by broader and not entirely coincident research questions, determines that comparability between each of the three periods and settings is, although controlled, not systematic for each topic. For example, the importance of wider and complex forms of relatedness that emerged in *Tires* in the nineties rendered the focus on mother-infant relationships, which were so central in prisoners' narratives in the eighties, less important. Therefore, the amount of data available on these relationships is not the same for the two periods. Contemporary *Santa Cruz* shows aspects of both previous periods in *Tires*. Taken together, these researches allow for a rich overall perspective on the aspects we set out to address in this paper.
- 6 Fieldwork in *Tires* was conducted in two periods, of two and one year respectively, separated by a decade (1987-1989; 1997). It benefited from unrestricted access to all prison facilities. Therefore, besides seventy in-depth interviews, this allowed for the observation and participation in most prison activities and daily life, as well as for engaging in informal individual and group conversations with prisoners on a regular basis and varied circumstances. In both periods a trustful relationship with prisoners was established, although not at the same rhythm nor by the same processes.² In both periods women were selected by combining a snowball progression that followed 'natural' networks and a systematic sampling that diversified inmates along lines of penal and social profile, as well as length and experience of confinement (Cunha, 1994, 2002).
- 7 In *Santa Cruz*, a six-month fieldwork was conducted during 2011. It consisted in ethnographic observations centered mainly on prison visitors (especially family members) and in-depth interviews with 20 incarcerated women. In this research a purposive sample was used, which means that new data were added to the analysis when deemed to be of theoretical interest. All participants were Portuguese, criminally convicted, had been imprisoned for more than six months and had at least one child. Five respondents were Roma/Gypsies.
- 8 The prison population of *Tires*, which in 1997 reached 823 prisoners, had evolved towards a striking social and penal homogeneity in the span of only a decade. In 1997, 76% of women were imprisoned for drug trafficking, compared to the 37% registered ten years earlier, and property offenders represented no more than 13%.³ The majority of those convicted (69%) were serving sentences of more than 5 years. Prisoners increasingly came from the segments of the working class most deprived of economic and educational capital: from 1987 to 1997 the proportion of women who held jobs in the bottom tier of the service economy rose from 4% to 33%, and the proportion of those who had never attended school or gone beyond the fourth grade rose from 47% to 59%. In *Santa Cruz* this proportion amounted to 67% in 2011. This prison has an average population of 265 inmates, between convicts and detainees. Most were imprisoned for drug trafficking (62%), and most of those convicted for more than 1 year (91%) were serving sentences of more than 6 years.
- 9 *Santa Cruz* thus approximately reproduces the pattern that emerged in *Tires* in the nineties, albeit more mitigated in some respects, including the fact that an important proportion of prisoners have relatives imprisoned in the same institution or in other prison facilities. In the case of *Tires*, according to a conservative estimate based on data registered in social-educational files, between one-half and two-thirds of the inmates in *Tires* had family members inside the same institution (sisters, cousins, aunts, nieces, mothers, grandmothers). This estimate does not include male partners and kin serving their own sentences in other facilities. In *Santa Cruz*, on the other hand, there are records on the proportion of prisoners (40%) who have applied for visits in male institutions (brothers, sons, husbands/partners) – which leaves inmate women relatives unaccounted for. Fieldwork, however, confirmed their existence along a similar pattern. This, as well as the presence of multiple neighbours and previous acquaintances doing time in the same facilities, has to do with the systematic recruiting of prison populations in a handful of poverty-stricken urban territories in the two main Portuguese metropolitan areas (Lisbon and Oporto). Since the 1990s, these neighbourhoods were linked to a booming petty drug economy and drew an intense attention from law enforcement agencies and the criminal justice system (see Cunha, 2008).

10 Circles of co-confined kin in the same institution can be quite large (reaching up to more than a dozen people) and may extend to three or four generations (when a great-grandson is born in prison to a prisoner whose daughter and granddaughter are also behind bars). In-prison relationships between mothers and their offspring can therefore include not only children but also adults – an aspect that has received little attention in the literature (but see Cunha, 2002) and which brings additional issues into play, such as the complex combination of institutional and parental forms of control analysed in Cunha (2008) and Cunha and Granja (2013).

2. Parenting behind bars: gender asymmetries

11 In Portugal, gender equality has been increasingly fostered by social policies, especially within the family sphere. Parental leave policies that seek to promote more egalitarian patterns of gender division of labour in the family are a recent example of this (Almeida, 2003; Wall, Aboim, Cunha, 2010).

12 Despite the promotion of gender equality in Portuguese legislation, there are, however, discrepancies between what is formally established by law and the existing social practices (influenced by individual trajectories, class, ethnicity, age and stage of the life cycle of women and men). Although several studies highlight the changes occurred in gender roles throughout recent years, they also point out that mechanisms of (re)production of inequalities between women and men persist to a considerable extent in private and in public domains (Almeida, 2003; Amâncio, 1994).

13 The tensions between that which is formally defined in the legal requirements and the everyday social practices enacted by individuals, are particularly visible in parenting in prison. Following broader Portuguese policies that address gender inequalities, prison regulations have also incorporated the principles of neutrality and formal equality between women and men. Currently, the law regulating children's stay in prison is gender neutral, that is, both imprisoned mothers and fathers are allowed to keep their offspring with them inside prison facilities (Law 115/2009). However, the implementation of this principle is complex and unequal. Logistics and practical dispositions render most men's prisons hardly suitable for children to reside with their imprisoned fathers. For example, there are no daycare centers in male institutions, nor adequate cells physically separated from other prison blocks (Law 51/2011). Furthermore, although the need to meet female prisoners' "special needs" regarding motherhood is mentioned in State guidelines about parenting in prison, there is no equivalent reference regarding fathering (Law 115/2009). Thus, despite recent legislation amendments that seek to mitigate gender differences, men's parenting role remains a largely neglected aspect of prison life and prison policy (Machado, Granja, 2013). As we point out below, this state of affairs is opposed to what we find regarding motherhood within prison.

14 But the asymmetry goes deeper. In general, it is more likely that women, rather than men, were the primary caretakers of children prior to incarceration (Mumola, 2000; Schafer, Dellinger, 2000). The literature has consistently reported that this is the case for the majority of inmate mothers. They tend to be the sole or main household provider as fathers were already also imprisoned or were absent parents (European Commission, 2005, 36). Therefore, upon imprisonment mothers cannot entrust children to the care of partners, thus becoming a source of increased concern and responsibility for them, whereas the reverse rarely occurs: when the father is imprisoned, children usually stay together with the mother under the same roof; when the mother is incarcerated, children often end up deprived of both parents, and of brothers and sisters as well, as siblings are distributed among kin, neighbors or institutions (Cunha, 2002; 2013; Palomar, 2007, 91). The range of implications and the impact on the family thus tends to be different according to the gender of the imprisoned parent (Schafer, Dellinger, 2000).⁴ In Portugal, as in other countries, besides institutions, children caregivers are usually family members, mostly women: sisters, mothers, grandmothers, aunts (Cunha, 2013; Mumola, 2000).

15 Mothers separated from their offspring by incarceration try to remain actively involved in children's lives by staying informed about their daily lives, addressing school issues, and coordinating their role with that of carers (Celinska, Siegel, 2010, Enos, 2001). Separation may

be a constant source of stress, besides generating feelings of being a “bad mother” (Mahan, 1982; Morash, Schram, 2002).

- 16 However, some mothers didn't live with their children prior to arrest. This was mainly due to several problems and cumulative social disadvantages (such as substance abuse, poverty, lack of suitable housing) leading them to play a peripheral role in child rearing, and sometimes even causing the loss of child custody (Granja, Cunha, Machado, 2013). Nevertheless, in the majority of cases these women were those who decided whom the children would live with, and these child-care configurations tend to remain stable after the mothers' imprisonment (Smith *et al*, 2004). While in prison, these mothers usually remain deeply connected to their maternal identity, and many have not given up hope of rebuilding or reestablishing their relationship with children after the prison term (Martin, 1997). Reuniting with their offspring is generally at the top of most inmate mothers' aspirations (Celinska, Siegel, 2010).
- 17 In sum, parenting in situations of imprisonment is largely a woman's business, whether *within* or *from* the prison setting.

3. Gendered prisons: past and present

- 18 The therapeutic trend⁵ that marked the history of women's penitentiary regimes during the first half of the 20th century (Carlen, 2007; Heidensohn, 1985) never fully occurred in Portugal. Instead of a strong medical and psychiatric influence in the definition and implementation of these regimes, in Portugal at that time, the main concern was to carry out a systematic program for the “moral regeneration” of delinquents (Cunha, 1994). Against the backdrop of religious exhortation, discipline, and ascetic austerity, the adopted treatment model was based on two ingredients, both drawing heavily on dominant gender ideologies: domesticity and motherhood. In Portugal as elsewhere, delinquent women were considered “double deviants”, that is, both as members of society and as members of their gender. Rehabilitation therefore meant putting them back on track of the female roles and spheres which they had supposedly strayed from. This perspective was in perfect harmonization with the State ideology of the *Estado Novo* dictatorial regime in Portugal (1933-1974) (*ibidem*, 1994). Its symbolic conflation of “home” and “nation” presented women as the nation's ultimate moral base and emphasized the need for their dedicated performance as wives and mothers as the only route for women's social existence and participation in the collective destiny (see Beleza dos Santos 1947; Salazar, 1977). This State ideology was at odds with social realities, in that it could only be fulfilled – or afforded – by the elites. With the exception of these groups, women in Portugal – and more so among the poor – have always resorted massively to work and wage labour as a survival strategy, without this being considered a transgression of a gender cultural script within their social milieu (Cole, 1991; Pujadas, 1994).
- 19 The above ingredients would nevertheless linger, albeit more tenuously, in prison institutions long after the democratic revolution of 1974 and still permeate prison life in contemporary times. The first ingredient in this foundational treatment model was the inculcation of domestic habits (Cunha, 1994; 2013). *Tires* was a clear illustration of that model. The penitentiary treatment program was built around domestic skills. This was expressed both in the spatial configuration of the institutional wards itself, as in the range of activities offered to prisoners. If laundry, cleaning and kitchen services were oversized, it was only because they were meant to respond not just to *Tires* prison's internal needs, but also to supply male prison facilities nearby. The whole rationale and organization of the domestic sphere was thus transferred to the carceral institution on a large scale basis. Most activities, whether for maintenance or production, were an extension of the domestic order. The predominance of so called “feminine” activities would last for decades. Gradually, however, it would cease to be presented as a method or a program for regeneration, designed and pursued with that explicit purpose. It became a mere effect of the *status quo* and disengagement from the outside world which is not uncommon in these institutions (Goffman, 1999 [1961]); secondly, it also reflected the occupational skills of inmates themselves, which were very scant and for the most part limited to domestic training, as in today's “modern” *Santa Cruz*, where the range of

activities available is, with a few exceptions, mostly centred on the domestic sphere. In any case, the geography of gender would continue to sharply determine the prison regime.

20 A second ingredient in the moral regeneration which was shaped by social notions of gender consisted in the attempt to instil feelings of maternal responsibility in inmates and cultivate mothering skills. Although permission to keep infant children in prison took the children's interests into account, it was primarily justified by the program's aim to educate the mothers. Aiming at the "social promotion of the delinquent woman", it was determined that "offspring, in the case of infants, should remain with the mothers so as to maintain and promote their sense of natural responsibilities" (Pinto, 1969, 56). Prison regulations also explicitly stipulated that prisoners should be taught to attend to their infant children inside the institution and that children should spend time with their mothers on a daily basis (Correia, 1981, 279).

21 Official regulations and institutional rules have remained stable over time in their general principles: namely, the age limit for children allowed to live in the institution with their mothers (three years-old, exceptionally five)⁶; the provision of a day nursery within the prison compound, but physically separated from prison blocks, where children remain during mothers' working hours, and where they are attended by trained personnel; a prison wing that houses prisoners with children together. These conditions are confirmed in both prisons considered here. Although stable in these aspects, explicitly gendered moral considerations have since long been expunged from official decrees, and their focus has shifted from the moral regeneration of prisoners (via leading them into proper motherhood) to accommodating the interest of the child.

4. Motherhood and mothering within prison

22 Considerations involving the mother role did not disappear from prison daily life however. They remained infused in informal institutional practices and interactions. Mothers may, for example, be assigned to assist day care staff as a way of improving mothering skills, or discouraged to leave their children in the nursery too prematurely. A *Tires* prison warden said, reproachfully:

There are some mothers who want to get rid of the children and be as little as possible with them. It's me who has to force them to stay with the children in their cells when they are still babies, otherwise they would put them in daycare. (Fieldwork diary, Tires, 1988).

23 Besides criticizing mothers for being too impatient or not caring enough for their children, prison guards also intervene in this aspect. Prisoners confined to the mother's wing feel that they are the object of constant additional control: attempts to socialize with prisoners from other wings (e.g. by making up errands to the prison shop) may be immediately curtailed by warnings that they must go back to attending to their children; guards are more rigorous with the hygiene and tidiness of these prisoners' cells (*we have to check and warn them all the time because kids take everything within reach to their mouths and some mothers are irresponsible* (Fieldwork diary, Tires, 1987); guards also admonish mothers if they deem children hygiene is being neglected or their feeding inadequate; they may punish prisoners for beating or shouting to much with their infants. Fátima had her younger son with her in prison during the first months of her sentence. However, she faced a criminal charge when guards reported her aggressive behaviour towards her children. Because of that, Fátima was forbidden to keep her son with her in prison.

For me it was easier to have my son with me here. But at the same time he did upset me. I'm not ashamed to say that! Sometimes he behaved badly and I beat him to straight him up. Guards made a complaint against me because I was beating my son. I went to court, I told the truth, and they sentenced me to one year probation. Then I went to punishment cell for eight days. (...) Then I was called to the director's room with my son. They told me that my son had to leave prison. I went nuts when they said that! (...) When they took my son away from me I fell on my knees, I could not stand it. They said, "Don't cry Fátima, you're sick" I said "I'm not sick, I'm going to be sick because now my son will go away." Fátima (aged 27, drug trafficking, interview, Santa Cruz, 2011).

24 The inmates in question deeply resent these interventions as they challenge their self-representation as mothers. They are especially adamant in repudiating them as illegitimate for

intruding in a domain perceived as indisputably theirs: *Guards should stay out of this; these are my children, not theirs!* (Fieldwork diary, Tires, 1988). In their eyes, the role of mother supersedes that of inmate and should remain out of the range of guard authority. Paradoxically, it is precisely in the name of often idealized notions of motherhood (and of the importance of being a “good mother”) that co-inmates approve guards’ interference: *The guards have every right to interfere: they have to educate them to be good mothers* (Fieldwork diary, Tires, 1988).

25 Prisoners are aware that their inmate and mother condition are somehow merged and some even suspect that their performance as mothers is assessed in the same way as their behaviour as prisoners – that is, with the potential to influence parole board deliberations. In any case, they sense all too well that the in-prison relationship with their offspring, and the language of *care* itself, are inescapably enclosed in the coercive management of the “total institution” (Goffman, 1999 [1961]). They also realize that children themselves, as they become socialized in prison routines, internalize their mothers’ position of subjection within the institution, where mothers can also be *scolded* like children. Antónia said: *My son knew. If the door opened and I didn’t have it [the prison uniform] on, he reminded me right away: “Mother, put it on, otherwise Mrs. Guard is going to scold you!”* Antónia (aged 42, attempted murder, interview, Santa Cruz, 2011).

26 Since the mass imprisonment of the nineties, co-imprisoned family members have also played a role in child support, sharing food and providing several kinds of assistance. Relatives can become as close caregivers as to be deeply disturbed when children to whom they have become emotionally attached reach the age of leaving the institution. Isabel, who was doing time together with her mother, two sisters, and a baby niece, asked to be relocated in another block when her niece left prison in order to avoid memories that had become too painful: *I couldn’t bear to see the children. I helped to raise my niece and it was as if I was seeing her. I felt bad, bad.* Isabel (aged 32, drug trafficking, interview, Santa Cruz, 2011).

27 In face of extended forms of *relatedness* (Carsten, 2000) involving children, which also exist in these women’s daily life outside prison, “mothering” appears as too narrow a category. It obscures aspects of relatedness, bondedness, caregiving – and gatekeeping – which have a reality of their own, independent of motherhood, and can therefore not be considered as its mere *ersatz* or extension.

28 Such forms of relatedness may also occur between non-relatives, especially in the mothers’ prison wing. In this wing inmates’ sociality has a distinct quality. Children are put at the forefront. Besides the fact that the mothers’ spare time is largely absorbed by childcare (feeding their children, bathing them, washing their clothes, playing with them, watching over them), all inmates have a more or less collective relationship with the kids in the wing.

29 Prisoners in the mothers’ wing give children affectionate nicknames, comment on their progress and achievements, protect them when the respective mothers snap at them (one even physically threatened the mother of a child to whom she had become particularly attached), help feeding them, take them to the playground or for a walk when the mother is remanded in the cell, or informally take charge of them when the child’s mother goes to court. Prisoners allowed to *go on [home] leave* sometimes collect children of imprisoned relatives or friends from institutions, and look after them in their homes during those periods. They offer advice to co-inmates on their children’s health issues and sometimes urge them, more alarmed than the mothers themselves, to take the children to the doctor without delay. They share food, clothing and children items. Inmate mothers who do not share are loathed more than informers.

30 Unlike other wings, sociality is strongly mediated by the presence of children, both in instances of solidarity (*we help each other out because of the kids* - Fieldwork diary, Tires, 1989), as well as of conflict. When a child is sick, all inmates may knock simultaneously on their door cells in order to alert the guards or to demand that the cell in question is opened. Likewise, fights and problems over children are a common source of quarrels.

31 As illustrated by the following short excerpts, mothers’ narratives focus on a recurrent theme: the way their children’s presence fulfils them, helps them cope and softens their prison experience (Cunha, 1994, 156; Serras, Pires, 2004, 420).

The best thing here is that they let us keep our children with us/Time passes more quickly. There's no time to get depressed, it makes me react/I don't take sleeping pills. My tranquilizers are my children/Those who don't have their kids here are mentally upset/ The company they keep makes up for all the chores and all the trouble in the world/ I only feel lonely at night, when they go to sleep and I am left with my thoughts // I'm always looking forward to the week-ends, so that I can be with my daughter all day long (Fieldwork diary, Tires, 1988).

- 32 These narratives almost always express a highly idealized maternal self-image that does not necessarily match actual interactions between mothers and their offspring, nor claims made by co-inmates, who sometimes take pride in saying that it was under their influence that mothers actually started to enjoy their children and to learn how to care for them: *Before she didn't care, now she even says 'Oh my Chico is so pretty, isn't he?'* (Fieldwork diary, Tires, 1989). Prisoners who admitted that at one point or another they had “no patience” for their children, or that their presence in such environment could also be overbearing (*the kids altogether, it's a racket. We can do nothing but run after them, stopping fights* - Fieldwork diary, Tires, 1988) were rare exceptions. Ana reports how mothering within prison affects her attitude:

If I did not have my daughter here and I would to explode, I would stay in my cell, hitting my head, punching, kicking, and crying ... I would. With my daughter here, I always have to be a mother.... My child comes first. I have to be focused on her always, I can't have that space of my own. But when she goes to her grandparents for a weekend I miss her. Ana (aged 28, qualified theft, interview, Santa Cruz, 2011).

- 33 Rosy narratives may be even more vivid in the recollections of inmates whose children have already left prison, insofar as only the gratifying moments are remembered. The decision taken by mothers to send children away from prison definitively before they reach the allowed age limit in the institution is mostly motivated by fears that child development is being hampered by their stay in prison. Nevertheless, as reported by Raquel, this is generally an ambivalent and complex decision, which is taken for the benefit of children:

I liked having him here because he [kept me company]. But I had to think more about my son than me. Because he does not have to pay for something I did. Now look back and see that I did the best thing by sending him away. (...) It's good for a mother to have children closer to her, but my son here never developed himself fully. He ran and fell, he didn't say the words right, nothing. Now he is outside and he's like a parrot. Raquel (aged 20, theft, interview, Santa Cruz, 2011).

- 34 Separation itself, whether during the prison sentence or upon imprisonment, allows for re-imagining mother-child relationships and for its re-elaboration in a positive light. Yet, as Palomar (2007, 372) has also noted, the prison environment does allow for experiencing motherhood in new ways, creating new subjectivities through which mothers in turn resignify previous experiences of maternity: sheltered from the pressures of everyday survival, poverty and violence, with time available to dedicate to their children (who now also receive specialized medical and psychological attention); constantly near them and exposed to expert educational and pedagogical discourses and programs, they may experience a bond with their children with unprecedented intensity and endow it with a meaning that takes centre stage in their lives thereon. It is hardly surprising that in such a context motherhood becomes hyperbolized in narratives of personal identity, including the way it is perceived in retrospect or projected in the future.

- 35 Nevertheless, some mothers express some ambivalence in this regard, showing concern about the effects of prison limitations and environment on children: the noise and the inmate fights, the oppressive prison bars, locks and keys, the confinement in the cell, the lack of exposure to the outside world.

I couldn't bear the sight of her confined in a tiny space, asking me to open the door. Then I said no: it is me who is supposed to suffer, not the kid. I had to send her away. I regretted keeping him here when I went out with him on temporary leave. He had never seen a street before; he was scared of the cars (Fieldwork diary, Tires, 1988).

- 36 Out of guilt, some of these mothers renounce keeping their children in prison; others decide by principle not to bring them from the start, deeming it would be harmful and selfish.⁷

5. Motherhood and mothering from prison

- 37 Guilt is a recurring theme in the narratives of inmate mothers. Self-blame is expressed equally by mothers who lived with their children prior to incarceration as by those who didn't. In the second case, especially drug users, they tend to think about themselves as "bad mothers", and are less likely to contact children while in prison (see in this respect Granja, Cunha, Machado, 2013).
- 38 Nevertheless, these women generally remain connected to a maternal identity, try to be informed about the children and plan to make amends, or make up, for their absence once they are released. Having discontinued drug abuse, away from the previous turmoil of their lives, they present themselves as different women and new mothers who "*learned [their] lesson*" in prison and are determined to reinvest in the relationship with their children. As recent research has shown, there is more to it than a simple tale of moral redemption. In some cases incarceration, rather than damaging relationships, can in the short term have more complex effects and open venues for renewing them, away from the pressures and problems outside, and interrupting destructive cycles of substance abuse and domestic violence. Prison may be a turning point also in problematic parent-child relationships, inasmuch as it sometimes functions, however inadequately, as an ersatz of a social agency for poor populations (Comfort, 2008).
- 39 Mothers who lived with their children prior to imprisonment shared similar feelings. Although motherhood is repeatedly invoked as a motive and justification for their offence (*I did it for my children; I had to feed my kids*), thus as a gendered "technique of neutralization" (Sykes, Matza, 1957), prisoners blame themselves – and are blamed by prison staff – not only for having offended, but also for failing to live up to motherly responsibilities (Cunha, 1994, 71). Worrying about their children, whom they hadn't seen in years, two Brazilian drug couriers said:

I feel a deep guilt, 'cause I'm a mother and I shouldn't have done what I did. I left my son when he just a few months old, now he is 5. I didn't see him grow up and I was not there when a mother is most needed. I don't even know whether he will accept me or recognize me as his mother (Fieldwork diary, Tires, 1988).

When I was imprisoned, 4 years ago, I left two kids: a 7-year old boy and an 11-year old girl. The first is OK, but I'm really worried about my daughter. She's going through adolescence, a difficult time, many psychological changes. She's confused, we have to stand close. I'm terrified that she'll take a wrong path. And I don't know what kind of letters to write anymore. Not the same as the ones I wrote for a child. Now she's a teen, of whom I know nothing about. That's what's tormenting me. If I regret it, it's only because of my children. Now I see that I was too selfish (Fieldwork diary, Tires, 1988).

- 40 These prisoners express some of the difficulties of mothering from prison in situations in which a nearly insurmountable physical distance makes children visits impossible.⁸
- 41 Concern, apprehension and helplessness, however, are common themes even for those who regularly see their children. According to Rita, while in prison a "real mother" is in a constant state of anxiety: *I'm very afraid of everything (...)* *A mother who is a mother is the most scared woman in the world - If she's a real mother.* Rita (aged 28, drug trafficking, interview, Santa Cruz, 2011).
- 42 Mothers worry when children are going through a difficult situation or run away from foster care; when they don't trust caregivers or when these become sick, disabled, overburdened (especially elderly grandparents), or change too often. Behind bars they feel helpless and powerless to solve the situation. The effects of separation imposed by incarceration produce feelings of anxiety, dismay, and alienation from their children that may be vividly experienced during prison visits – when mutual strangeness becomes more apparent:

The first days, weeks, my mother didn't bring my daughter to see me (...). Then when she came, I was devastated because she already walked! When she came walking towards me, I was stunned! How come she started walking in such a short time? (...) And then I called her, she looked at me and it seemed like she was seeing the devil. She screamed, yelled ... clung to the neck of my mother, saying she didn't want [to be here]... I don't know... She has forgotten me (...) I just know she looked at me and screamed. Rita (Interview, Santa Cruz, 2011).

Then I mistook a kid for another. I said "Hi, my dear? 'Are you Daniel?'" No mom, I'm João. Fátima (Interview, Santa Cruz, 2011).

- 43 In-prison motherhood is affected by inherent contradictions. While there is a discursive exaltation of maternal identity, it is difficult to act upon it when children are actually taken care of by others. The mother role becomes dissociated from that of caregiver, that is, a form devoid of content. Yet inmate mothers try to perform that identity by mothering from prison and asserting their maternal responsibilities in various ways. They warn children to stay out of trouble or advise them to behave properly (especially teenage girls), which may include specific rewards and punishments (e.g. suspending video games or going out with friends); they try to contact children's schools, teachers or other institutions when a problem arises, and they cling to the role of providers by sending money to the caregivers. Claudia explains how she tries to be present in her daughter's life:

I'm always present. The other day I wrote to Social Security to help me transfer my daughter from that school. I'm just not there in flesh, otherwise I do all I can from here to help my daughter. (...) I earned 150 € a month [in prison] and it was sent out for my daughter as soon as the money was put into my account. I didn't even keep 20 € for myself. It wasn't because she needed it, because she doesn't. But as a parent I have to help. Claudia (aged 35, drug trafficking, interview, Santa Cruz, 2011).

- 44 Mothers also try to preserve parental authority by having the final say in decisions regarding children, especially if they disagree with caregivers. Carla's youngest daughter is in the care of her mother and an adult niece. She described a quarrel she had with her niece for beating her daughter and asserted her views about child rearing, over the carer's.

My niece is very strict with my daughter; I understand she has to be like that sometimes, but not excessively like one time when she beat my daughter. And I had a fight with her, "I won't have you or anyone else beating my daughter!". Carla (aged 47, fraud, interview, Santa Cruz, 2011).

- 45 This assertiveness is viable when mothers have a close personal relationship with caregivers and are in good terms with them. Apart from this, they have to navigate a complex and ambivalent relationship, which they are forced to rely on, in order to be able to keep contact with their children. When this link deteriorates, caregivers' support may turn into gatekeeping, that is, carers may restrict the mothers' access to their children, actually preventing them from maintaining a relationship with their offspring. Gatekeeping therefore becomes a major source of stress for inmate mothers. In the few cases in which caregivers are the fathers, such gatekeeping may be used as "punishment" for the end of the relationship (usually by the women's initiative).

6. In-prison gender identity and relatedness

- 46 In the third section we suggested that women's penitentiary treatment in Portugal was dictated mainly by gender ideologies, insofar as it was aimed at returning delinquents to the "feminine" roles they had supposedly deviated from. Thus the institution insisted on motherhood as part of the penitentiary program of moral regeneration. Yet, contrary to this gendered image of the stranded woman, inmates have for the most part tended to express *conformity* – not "deviance" – to conventional definitions of their gender. In *Tires* during the 1980s, this conformity was even clearly inscribed on prisoners' sociality itself, which was centred on in-prison mother-child relationships or marital-like couples, and was otherwise highly atomized: inmates generally did not act nor see themselves as a group, and actually developed a refined rhetoric of mutual denigration.⁹ Although the importance of these dyadic relationships was expressed by inmates in the language of affection and emotions, the support they provided had an identitarian aspect that confirmed them first of all as relational beings, more exactly in the relational roles which were normative markers of their gender ("mother", "wife"/"romantic partner"). Gender identity occupied the front stage of the prison scene, both by the way it was performed through this sociality and how it was repeatedly asserted in "prison talk", which focused mainly on children and partners, namely on how the separation from them was at the top of the "pains of imprisonment". But, as Cunha described in detail elsewhere (1994), the adherence to conventional gender roles also emerged as a way to shelter social identity from

the stigma attached to imprisonment, that is, as a viable route to negotiate and exorcize stigma. In other words, the narrative importance of the “good mother” was also instrumental in stating the rejection of a “deviant” identity and invoked as a synonym of a “good citizen”.

47 Ten years later, as Cunha subsequently showed (2002), the prominence of gender identity in the prison scene would give way to a new sense of collective identity, based on the prisoners’ sharing of a common provenance from the same destitute urban areas, on kin, friendship, and neighbourhood ties, and on a shared position at the low bottom of the class structure. The notion of a shared destiny was now emphasized over other identities – gender and race/ethnicity alike. In the face of these collective categories of agency and identity, within which prisoners came to react to their common marginalization (e.g. the perception that *we’re all in the same boat*, the rhetoric of “community” constantly reasserted in prison talk, wider forms of solidarity and resistance), other levels of identity such as gender became more discreet in prison life.

48 Moreover, prison stigma ceased to be an issue. Prison merely compounds the structural and symbolic marginalization that now affects imprisoned populations collectively and much deeper than before. Stigma is no longer negotiable – either through gender conformity or otherwise (Cunha, 2008). These categories of identity and social forms were also complexified by mass incarceration and the co-imprisonment of relatives. The sociology of relatedness, as well as the “ethics of care” once identified with women *qua* mothers are not limited to mother-child dyads anymore, but involve wider circles of relationships. We have exemplified how co-imprisoned family members and other prisoners participate collectively in the in-prison care of children, in sharing food, affection and assistance. Furthermore, as we have analysed elsewhere (Cunha 2002; Cunha, Granja, 2013), since co-imprisoned mothers and daughters can both be adults, and the ethics of care involves more than two generations simultaneously, care is now enmeshed in a wider and more (even if not altogether) gender-neutral ethics of respect, reciprocity, and moral obligation between family members. Daughters, as well as sons, are supposed to respect and support their parents within and from beyond prison walls. It is disrespectful not to be loyal, deferent, or not to reciprocate the care they received from their parents when they were children.

Final remarks

49 The first two periods considered above (late eighties, late nineties), when the focus on gender as a category of social identity receded from the foreground to the backstage of the prison scene, express in different degrees two kinds of identity effects conveyed by motherhood in prison, and which are also currently (2011) combined in *Santa Cruz*: first, as an anchor of a “non-deviant” social identity and, second, as a source of meaning that reshapes, recreates or reinvents a personal identity in the present, re-signifies it in the past and projects it in the future. These contextual variations surrounding motherhood in prison historicize it sufficiently enough to caution us against presuming that it predefines women’s whole identity in incarceration situations. This is all the more true as, from the nineties on, in-prison relatedness and family forms have become more varied, not limited to the mother-infant dyad anymore; additionally, class-based collective solidarities gained strength in the prison scene and became an important facet of prisoners’ social identity. Yet, in the three periods covered by this article, women’s prisons such as the ones dealt with in this paper do invite and promote an exaltation of motherhood that enhances gender asymmetries in parenting. They amplify them, not only because they have persistently emphasized reproduction and domesticity or because the idea of “inmate fathers” is still as alien to prison organizations as the one of “inmate mothers” (and their “special needs”) is central to women’s.¹⁰ They do so because their environment focuses on motherhood and the mother-child bond in a way that is highly idealized and disconnected from the actual experiences and harsh realities of these women’s lives. Prisons thereby participate in the essentialization of motherhood, both as a naturalized aspect of gender and as an ideal hardly within the reach of the populations it incarcerates. It is behind bars that mothers find the time, the structure or the resources necessary to measure up to such an ideal. But it is also behind bars that this ideal contributes

to deepen feelings of self-blame, inadequacy, and dysfunctionality, while at the same time it further excludes fathers and exonerates them from their own emotional, socio-economic and moral responsibilities.

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Notes

- 1 The latter (*Santa Cruz*) even came to absorb, upon its opening, part of the prisoners of the former (*Tires*), which was overcrowded by then.
- 2 The reasons for this are analyzed in Cunha (2002).
- 3 All the statistics concerning the two prisons were produced by us through a combination of different local records, holding different and complementary data: administrative, judicial, and the files of professional staff, such as social workers.
- 4 There is far higher proportion of fathers than mothers behind bars (Wolleswinkel, 2002), as women do not account for more than 5% to 10% of incarcerated populations.
- 5 Based on neo-lombrosian perspectives addressing female criminality, during the first half of the 20th century prison policies in some European countries and in United States, adopted a therapeutic treatment based on medical and psychiatric intervention. Although this trend has been mitigated over the years, according to Pat Carlen (2007, 1007) there is a revival of these approaches in policies that address women's socio-economic problems by repositioning them as "cognitive" problems.
- 6 For recent general regulations, see General Regulation for Portuguese Prisons, Law 51/2011.
- 7 This opinion is also expressed by male prison guards. Women guards tend to understand mothers' decision to keep the children with them.
- 8 Besides physical distance, obstacles preventing parent-child prison visits can be associated with caregivers' unwillingness to maintain it or with other difficulties; see Granja, Cunha, Machado, 2013.
- 9 See Cunha (1994) for a development of this point.
- 10 For the way prisons and the judicial system fail to include fathers into sharing the burdens of parenthood; see Palomar (2007) and Machado, Granja (2013).

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Résumés

Asymétries de genre, parentalité et enfermement dans deux prisons portugaises

La parentalité est une relation marquée par les catégories de genre. Elle intervient de façon différenciée dans les définitions du masculin et du féminin, les femmes, plus que les hommes étant désignées à travers leur fonction maternelle. Les situations d'incarcération peuvent amplifier ou au contraire nuancer cette asymétrie de genre. À partir d'une recherche réalisée dans deux prisons portugaises à différentes périodes, cet article revient sur cette asymétrie tout en montrant comment l'identité maternelle prend des formes variables selon les époques, les situations carcérales et les lieux de détention.

Parenthood is a gendered relation, but its bearing on how men and women "do" gender differs: fatherhood is more peripheral an attribute in men's conventional gender definitions than motherhood is in women's. Confinement situations may amplify this asymmetry. However, as prisons reflect structural variations, the very saliency of gender as a category of identity may be highly contextual. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in different periods in Portuguese carceral settings, we will focus on variable aspects of motherhood and forms of relatedness in different imprisonment situations.

Entrées d'index

Mots-clés : parentalités, maternité, genre, liens, incarcération

Keywords : parenthood, motherhood, gender, relatedness, imprisonment

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