



Research Article

Mothers Behind Bars: (Re)construction of Motherhood in a Correctional Institute for Women in the Philippines

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Abstract

The increase in incarcerated mothers in the Philippines has raised concerns regarding their welfare. However, the impact of incarceration on motherhood needs further study and has been an underexplored topic of feminism. This study explored how women navigate and negotiate motherhood in a Correctional Institute for Women (CIW) in the Philippines. Researchers employed a case study approach and conducted key informant interviews to explore how incarcerated mothers fulfill their maternal role and to examine the context of motherhood within incarceration. The collected data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed to identify themes. The findings reveal that motherhood in CIW deviates from traditional notions of motherhood. Despite the absence of direct caregiving, incarcerated mothers perform their maternal role through emotional and spiritual connections with their children. Motherhood in the context of incarcerated women in CIW can be seen as taking control of their agency; however, it is exacerbated by their socioeconomic backgrounds. The findings suggest the development of a comprehensive profiling system of incarcerated women and its integration in the family support services in the CIW plans to promote a more inclusive and responsive program.

Keywords: *mothers, mothering, motherhood, incarceration, feminism*

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Introduction

Women in state prisons are more likely to be incarcerated for drug-related charges, as reported by Monazzam and Budd (2023), 25% of incarcerated women face drug charges, compared to only 12% of men. In the context of the Philippines under President Duterte's administration up to April 2021, over 1,600 pregnant detainees were recorded, with at least 485 births occurring in detention over two years. Notably, around 80% of these women faced drug-related charges, coinciding with a significant

increase in female drug arrests from approximately 9,000 in 2015 to over 15,000 (Cabato, 2021). Moreover, according to UN Women (2022), the Philippines ranked seventh globally for the highest number of incarcerated women in 2021.

This increasing number of incarcerated women has raised concerns about their welfare, which includes, according to Alvarez (2018), a standardized needs assessment process, family and visitation, treatment of pregnant women, and stigma and discrimination. Moreover, a study conducted in the Philippines at the Correctional Institute for Women in Mandaluyong City

(Sanchez, 2017) and at the Iloilo City District Jail-Female Dorm (Villanueva & Gayoles, 2019) found that many incarcerated mothers expressed deep concern for the well-being of their families and children during their imprisonment.

Despite these concerns, the specific needs of incarcerated mothers often receive little attention within prison systems. As Muhammad et al. (2019) observed in the Indonesian context, limited institutional resources contribute to the neglect of incarcerated mothers, even as the prison population has rapidly increased—from 1,807 in 2000 to 11,465 in 2017. Baker and Dignity (2015) similarly emphasized that this lack of resources results in poor treatment for the rights of incarcerated women in general, which highlights the importance of further examining the impact of incarceration on mothers.

However, feminist scholarship is rarely mother-centered and has often overlooked the experiences of incarcerated mothers; instead, studies focus on the consequences of maternal incarceration on the children without foregrounding the lived experiences of mothers (Allen & Hardiman, 2013; O'Reilly, 2016; Easterling, 2021). Through matricentric feminism, this study aims to situate incarcerated mothers at the center of analysis.

Nonetheless, the maternal role is essential for women's empowerment and fundamental human rights. Incarcerated mothers must navigate the complex challenges of preserving their maternal identity while grappling with emotional distress and physical separation from their children (Baldwin, 2018). The study of motherhood in the context of incarceration brings overdue attention to a marginalized group within feminist research. This study argued that their experiences warrant a deeper academic inquiry through exploring the struggles and coping mechanisms of mothers deprived of liberty.

In this context, the present research aimed to examine how incarcerated mothers negotiate and navigate motherhood while incarcerated in a Correctional Institute for Women in the Philippines, a facility operated by the Bureau of Corrections under the Department of Justice. This study specifically sought to explore how incarcerated mothers fulfill their maternal role and to examine the context of motherhood within incarceration.

Theoretical Framework

Matricentric feminism is the theoretical framework of this study that centers the experiences of mothers as a distinct and often marginalized category within feminist inquiry

(O'Reilly, 2016). While mainstream feminism has historically focused on broader issues of gender equality, matricentric feminism emphasizes the specific challenges that mothers face, in this study, the incarcerated women of CIW. The framework allows for a critical examination of how incarcerated mothers negotiate their maternal roles. Matricentric feminism highlights the institutional barriers that limit maternal agency and the social stigma that frames incarcerated mothers as "unfit" or deviant (Riley, 2016; Baldwin, 2018). Moreover, matricentric feminism provides space to recognize maternal resilience to maintain their identities as mothers while incarcerated (Easterling, 2021).

This study also draws on Sarah Ruddick's (1989) theory of maternal thinking, which explains that mothering is a form of ethical and cognitive work shaped by three core aims: preservation, growth, and social acceptability. These aims guide mothers in raising children, regardless of context. In the case of incarcerated mothers, preservation is evident in their continued concern for their children's safety and well-being despite the constraints imposed by incarceration. Growth is reflected in their desire to nurture their children's emotionally and intellectually development, often by offering guidance through limited communication or by improving themselves as mothers while in custody. Finally, social acceptability emerges in their efforts to instill values and norms, aiming to ensure their children are prepared to function positively within society. Ruddick's framework helps to explain how maternal identity persists even under the constraints of incarceration.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically utilizing a case study approach, to explore how incarcerated mothers navigate and negotiate motherhood while incarcerated. As defined by Creswell (2018), a case study involves an in-depth description and analysis of a particular case, such as an event, program, activity, or group of individuals. This approach is particularly well-suited to understanding the meanings that individuals or groups assign to complex social or human issues. In the context of this research, the case study design aims to explore how incarcerated mothers fulfill their maternal role and to examine the context of motherhood within incarceration.

Research Locale

One of the correctional institutions for women in the Philippines served as the research locale of the study. This is operated by the Bureau of Corrections under the Department of Justice. It

Figure 1

Research Locale (Source: Google Maps).



is situated in the southern region of the country. The facility is a relatively recent addition, constructed and inaugurated in 2007, to help address the issue of overcrowding. Established by the Department of Justice, the Correctional Institute for Women aims to provide female persons deprived of liberty (PDLs) the opportunity to serve their sentences closer to their families.

Participants of the Study

This study involved 15 incarcerated mothers who were purposively selected and equally distributed across minimum, medium, and maximum-security classifications at the Correctional Institute for Women. According to the Bureau of Corrections Operating Manual (2021), minimum-security inmates are those who can be reasonably trusted to serve their sentences under less restrictive conditions. The five participants classified under minimum security had already served at least one-half of their minimum sentence or one-third of their maximum sentence, excluding any reasonable conduct time allowance.

Medium-security inmates include those who cannot be entrusted to stay in less secure areas and whose behavior requires a moderate level of supervision. The five participants in this category included women whose minimum sentence was less than 20 years, remand inmates or detainees with sentences below 20 years, and first-time offenders sentenced to life imprisonment who had already served up to five years in a maximum-security facility—provided they had been recommended for reclassification by the Superintendent.

Maximum-security inmates are considered highly dangerous or high-risk individuals who require the highest level of control and supervision.

The five participants in this group included women with minimum sentences of 20 years or more, detainees with sentences of 20 years or more, and those whose cases were either under review by the Supreme Court or the Court of Appeals or pending resolution.

Research Instrument

A semi-structured interview guide was utilized for the Key Informant Interviews (KII), initially written in English and translated into the local vernacular to ensure comprehensibility. Subject matter experts validated the guide before data collection to ensure that the questions aligned with the study's objectives and were appropriate for the target participants. One-on-one interviews were conducted with 15 participants—five each from the minimum-, medium-, and maximum-security classifications. This approach allowed for the collection of a broad range of perspectives and facilitated an in-depth understanding of the participants' lived experiences.

Data Gathering Procedure

Before data collection, the researchers prepared and sent formal request letters to the Bureau of Corrections and the Correctional Institute for Women (CIW) office to seek permission to conduct the study. Researchers obtained approval from the national office of the Bureau of Corrections to ensure compliance with institutional protocols. Once the researchers secured permissions, they coordinated with CIW Norte to schedule the interviews. In-depth interviews were then conducted with incarcerated mothers at the facility, using a voice recorder to capture the discussions accurately. For the safety of both the participants and the researchers, a

designated staff member from the facility was present during the interviews.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the Key Informant Interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method that involves identifying, organizing, and interpreting recurring patterns and themes within qualitative data. This approach allowed the researchers to generate meaningful insights from the participants' responses—insights that have not been previously published or presented elsewhere. Through systematic coding, researchers identified key themes and categorized them to reflect the lived experiences of the incarcerated mothers.

To enhance the reliability of the analysis, two independent coders reviewed the data, allowing for inter-coder reliability checks. In addition, researchers employed peer debriefing, discussing their interpretations with a fellow researcher and an academic colleague, to validate interpretations and minimize potential biases. Future iterations of the study may incorporate member checking further to strengthen the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the Bureau of Corrections Operations Manual. Before data collection, official approval was obtained from the National Headquarters of the Bureau of Corrections under the Department of Justice, with the Director General authorizing the study within the institution. All interviews were conducted in accordance with institutional security protocols and procedures outlined in the Operations Manual. A designated facility staff member was present during the interviews to ensure the safety of both the participants and the researchers.

Researchers obtained informed consent from all participants before the interviews, which were conducted during regular visiting hours in a designated area identified by CIW personnel. Participation in the study was voluntary, and all data collected were treated with strict ethical considerations. The researchers ensured the confidentiality of all data and documentation.

Additionally, this study adhered to the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) checklist (Tong et al., 2007) to promote comprehensive and transparent reporting. This included key elements such as researcher reflexivity, participant selection, data collection procedures, interview setting, and methods of data analysis. Due to the sensitive nature of the data and the confidentiality assured to participants, full interview transcripts were not publicly available. However, anonymized excerpts may be

provided upon reasonable request.

Results and Discussion

This study involved 15 incarcerated mothers who were purposively selected and equally distributed across minimum, medium, and maximum-security classifications within the Correctional Institute for Women (CIW). The selection ensured representation by security level and sentence classification as defined by the Bureau of Corrections (2021) Operating Manual. Five participants came from the minimum-security group—individuals considered low risk and who have already served at least one-half of their minimum sentence or one-third of their maximum sentence, excluding reasonable conduct time allowance. Another five participants were from medium security, comprising mothers whose sentences were less than 20 years, first-time offenders sentenced to life but have served 5 years in maximum security, or detainees awaiting trial with sentences below 20 years. The remaining five participants were from maximum-security facilities and were classified as high-risk inmates requiring strict supervision. This group includes mothers sentenced to at least 20 years, those with pending cases before the Court of Appeals or the Supreme Court, and detainees under review for serious offenses.

Mothering Behind Bars: Struggles, Resilience, and Reformation

As mothers navigate their maternal role, incarcerated mothers face a significantly greater challenge in fulfilling their maternal role due to barriers imposed by imprisonment. Key Informant Interviews with the incarcerated mothers in the Correctional Institute of Women (CIW) highlight the distinct and varied challenges they encounter.

Barriers to Maternal Roles: Struggles of Incarcerated Mothers

The limitations imposed on incarcerated individuals, especially mothers, severely affect their ability to fulfill their maternal obligations. In these spaces, as Baldwin (2018) pointed out, mothers often face compounded stigmas: as women, as prisoners, and as mothers. Many incarcerated mothers strongly express the challenge of the direct caregiving role, and the participants also mentioned the difficulty of being far from their families, the rare visits, and financial constraints. One of the imprisoned mothers explained:

It is very different. Before, my children were always with me, and I would feel lost without them. Now, I

Table 1.*Thematic analysis on the struggles, resilience, and reformation of incarcerated mothers.*

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Description
Mothering Behind Bars: Struggles, Resilience, and Reformation	Barriers to Maternal Roles: Struggles of Incarcerated Mothers	Incarcerated mothers face emotional, financial, and institutional barriers that hinder their ability to fulfill caregiving roles. Limited visits, rare communication, job instability, and social stigma contribute to maternal role strain, guilt, and weakened bonds with their children.
	Communication and Faith: The Resilience of Incarcerated Mothers	Despite physical separation, incarcerated mothers sustain their maternal roles through limited communication (e.g., Tawag Kalinga, letters) and deep reliance on faith. Religion becomes a coping mechanism and emotional anchor, allowing them to express love, support, and guidance from afar.
	Spirituality and Education: Reformation of Incarcerated Mothers	Through spiritual programs and educational opportunities, incarcerated mothers find personal growth, renewed faith, and a redefined maternal identity. These support systems aid in emotional healing, self-discipline, and preparation for future reintegration and parenting.

can only imagine seeing them. I sometimes wake up randomly because I cannot see them. When I first arrived, I was highly stressed; I did not know what to feel, and I felt lost.

Furthermore, the scarcity of the call program and the limited visitation also contribute to the difficulties. As Luke (2022) pointed out, this further restricts the ability of mothers to remain connected to their children. One of the mothers recalled that she had not been visited for many years, saying, *"I feel that we are all so different now." It felt like they no longer recognized me because we had not seen each other since 2020, which was their last visit."* Another incarcerated mother also echoed the same sentiment, highlighting the rare opportunities for communication: *It has been six years since their previous visit. Now, I can only rely on rare calls to express my love and ask for their forgiveness for not being there. What my mother is doing, that should have been me."*

Central to the narratives, incarceration presents significant challenges and difficulties for women. Kaniamattam and Oxley (2021) pointed out that this is true especially for those incarcerated mothers whose primary role is to be caregivers. This separation creates a profound challenge for mothers, whose experiences are often conflicts and strains in their maternal role, along with an overwhelming burden of attempting to fulfill their parental responsibilities whilst being in the confines of prison. Some mothers have expressed a

great sense of worry, grief, sadness, and regret due to their longing to see their children and concern for their well-being. As one mother expressed:

It is lonely. I miss my family, especially my kids. I am particularly sad because the 10-month-old child I had with me (inside prison) is now the only daughter whom I have had a chance to care for and give my love to. It hurts me deeply that after her birthday, she will go home to my parents.

Another participant expressed that the most challenging part of being an incarcerated mother is, *"When the kids catch a fever or cough, and I am not by their side, it is frustrating. There is nothing I can do to help. It affects me mentally; it hurts my head thinking of ways I can help them."* Although there are livelihood programs from Tagum Agricultural Development Company (TADECO) available for mothers, some still face financial challenges due to job instability, as recalled by one mother when she was still in Medium Prison: *"Though thankfully there is not right now, but back when I was in medium prison, TADECO had to lay off many of us. Three months of joblessness, repeating that cycle because there were more available jobs."*

The limited number of jobs heavily affects some mothers' ability to support their children financially. Only half of the interviewed incarcerated mothers expressed that they can financially support their children. In contrast, others relied on their hard work, such as selling peanuts, to send a meager amount of money to help their children. As shared

by the participant, *"That is also a challenge since I do not have a job. I try to earn from small hobbies here, like doing laundry, to give them some pocket money whenever they visit."*

Additionally, challenges arise in the relationship between the child and the incarcerated mothers. As Easterling (2021) explained, incarcerated mothers experience forced separation from their children, lack of access to maternal support programs, and institutional structures that often erase or delegitimize their maternal identities. Some have strained relationships due to separation. For instance, as recounted by one of the participants, *"My child does not want to talk to me yet. I heard them say, 'If only you had listened to me, we would not be in this situation. Those words still haunt me.'* Agreeing with the sentiments of participants, one participant shared, *"There is a gap now. Before, they liked to call me 'Mama... mama' all the time, but now they are hesitant because it has been seven years since I was able to go home (before incarceration)."*

Communication, Livelihood, and Faith: The Resilience of Incarcerated Mothers

Fulfilling their obligations as mothers is seen as a significant obstacle by incarcerated mothers. Imprisonment compounded by distance and financial barriers, presents immense challenges. Thus, there is a need for incarcerated mothers to be active in the lives of their children since incarceration, as Baldwin (2021) described, has made their lives less of a mother.

Many mothers fulfill their maternal role by connecting with their children through a program provided by the bureau known as *Tawag Kalinga*, which allows incarcerated individuals to make occasional phone calls. Some also maintain connections by communicating through letters, offering encouragement, love, and support. As narrated by one informant: *"I write letters to encourage my child to study well, even though I am not there. Despite the distance, we still communicate, and I want them to feel that they are essential to me."* Another mother shared a similar experience: *"Through 'Tawag Kalinga', I talk to my eldest, who is now in his youth. I ask him how life is, how he is doing, and if his schooling is okay."* For some mothers, visits from their children are more frequent, especially when they live nearby or have the financial resources to travel. One of the informants detailed:

I consider myself luckier than my fellow PDLs because I have come from this area. My children can visit me sometimes, usually twice a week. When they visit, we discuss their problems and needs and determine if they require assistance. Sometimes

one of them brings their school module, and I help them study.

As Baldwin (2018) notes, many incarcerated mothers continue to see motherhood as central to their sense of self and use it as a source of motivation and emotional survival. Prevalent across many of the incarcerated mothers, they recounted that they can only fulfill their obligations through advice from *'Tawag Kalinga'*. Moreover, it is widely acknowledged that some individuals were able to visit their family and children due to a shorter distance, or, as others have recounted, if their families had the resources to spare.

Moreover, informants explained that they were able to financially support their children through livelihood programs, hobbies, and various strategies. As is evident, most participants who take on a financial role in their children are employed in the packaging division of a banana plantation under a contract between TADECO and the Bureau of Corrections (BuCor), thereby providing livelihood employment for many incarcerated individuals. As one informant recalled: *"I work at TADECO, and that is my way of helping them (my children), if I have pay and money."* As shared by another informant, recalling her experience, *"I was also one of the first to work at TADECO, earning a salary every 15 days, on the 5th and 20th of each month. Back in the days when they were still in school, I used to send money to my children for their schooling."*

Although not everyone has the opportunity to do so, a minority of people rely solely on hobbies and various strategies, as one informant shared, *"I have been working hard here, selling peanuts to earn money, even for just a small percentage. They are so happy when I send anything, even if it is small. I have entered any jobs here to make money."*

Moreover, an interesting case to note is that among all incarcerated mothers, they have all strongly conveyed and expressed prevailing sentiments about faith and religion as a way to channel their obligations as parents. As shared by an informant: *"It is different because, outside, I am very hands-on and I could personally take care of them. Inside, all I can do is pray for them, as I feel helpless to do more. To ease ourselves, prayer has and is the best remedy for us."* Further, faith has also been referred to by many of the incarcerated mothers as the 'lifeline' and 'comforter' that the mothers used as a way to help their family, and as an escape to repent.

I pray for my child, asking God to keep them safe and away from harm. I pray for forgiveness for not fulfilling my duties as a mother because I am in prison. All of it, I pray. Though my mother is

there to guide them, it is painful because I should be the one there for my child.

This religious belief effect is similar to another study by Ceballo (2022), wherein the focus of their research is on the impact on incarcerated mothers on their children. Mothers use religious beliefs as a coping mechanism, often guiding their children through prayers. This reliance on spirituality and religiosity reflects a broader trend in the Philippines, as people turn to faith in times of adversity.

Religion functions not only as a source of comfort but also as a psychological strategy for continuing to fulfill maternal responsibilities in a non-physical, spiritual way. Studies in the Filipino context emphasize the resilience born of faith, particularly among marginalized women facing adversity (Agbayani & David, 2019). Thus, religion plays a significant role in how individuals, in this case, the mothers, weaponize faith to navigate adversity and fulfill their obligations as mothers and parents to their children.

Spirituality and Education: Reformation of Incarcerated Mothers

The multiple challenges and disadvantages present in incarceration, mothers in CIW are beset with the dilemma of practical struggle in negotiating maternal identity and mothering, as well as emotional struggles while being incarcerated and spatially separated from their children, which Baldwin (2018) has also identified.

Mothers in CIW constitute the description of Baldwin (2021) argues that mothers continue to prioritize their children as their primary concern and focus whilst being in prison. These mothers continually demonstrated a persistent problem for their children's well-being, underscoring the persisting strength of the maternal bond even in the face of challenges and adversities within the prison walls.

The incarcerated mothers are shaped by their complex adversities. Not only had there been negativities surrounding an incarcerated mother. However, the system had proved to be beneficial for them, as broadly acknowledged by the informants. For instance, when asked which program helped them while in prison, most were explicitly thankful for some of the six components within the institution, primarily the spiritual aspect.

These spiritual dimensions of motherhood also align with cultural patterns in the Philippines, where religiosity and prayer are often turned to in moments of hardship and separation (Ceballo, 2022; Rungduin et al., 2020). As an informant shared, what helped her while inside the institution was: "*I am active in moral and spiritual*

programs. They have helped me reflect and grow as a person, but ultimately, I know no one can help me but God." Another informant further supports this: "*Outside, I did not know God, but here, I learned to read the Bible and went back to school. I finished my education here, which is something I can be proud of when I reunite with my children.*"

Education, similarly, emerges as a powerful rehabilitative tool. Access to formal education inside prison provides a concrete path toward self-improvement and post-release reintegration (O'Malley & Devaney, 2016). For incarcerated mothers, schooling is often seen not only as a personal achievement but also as an investment in their ability to provide for their children in the future. Completing basic or higher education behind bars helps them develop new identities beyond their criminal record—identities rooted in self-worth, discipline, and hope (Lockwood et al., 2015). In the CIW, educational initiatives are frequently cited by inmates as key factors in their transformation, instilling a sense of pride and purpose.

Further, one incarcerated mother even expressed how she is changing for her children, which has also been occasionally implied by other informants: "*From schooling, attending mass, their moral-spiritual and educational, and by focusing on tasks assigned here at CIW. I also learned to control my temper, to be more friendly and humble, and to understand others.*" O'Malley and Devaney (2016) affirm that prison, despite its punitive function, can serve as a sanctuary for reflection and personal development—particularly when inmates come from violent or unstable environments. In such contexts, incarcerated mothers may view prison-based spiritual and educational programs not only as support systems but as lifelines for rebuilding their identities as nurturing and responsible mothers.

This study found that for these women, this is a new and positive opportunity to pursue support services and create a change for personal transformation, for their well-being and their children. Thus, as further supported in a study by O'Malley and Devaney (2016), some mothers may perceive prison as a safe space and environment, offering a change from the harmful circumstances they were faced with before being incarcerated.

Motherhood Behind Bars: The Context of Motherhood in Incarceration

Traditionally, as Ruddick (1980) stated, a mother in a patriarchal society follows a standard of "preservation, growth, and social acceptability". Ruddick's Maternal Thinking (1980) highlights the primary demand imposed by a patriarchal society on women; failing to meet this

Table 2.*Constructs of Traditional Motherhood and Motherhood in Incarceration.*

Maternal Role	Maternal Thinking (Ruddick, 1989)	Motherhood in CIW
Preservation Role: Maternal Identity and Societal Expectations	The preservative demand centers on the mother's responsibility to protect her child's life and ensure their survival.	Incarcerated mothers face difficulty fulfilling their traditional caregiving roles—many attempt to preserve their maternal identity through emotional support, rare communication, and symbolic care.
Growth Role: Connecting and Nurturing from Afar	Mothers must foster capacities for resilience, empathy, and curiosity in their children, even in the face of personal hardship.	Incarcerated mothers struggle to nurture their children's growth due to emotional distance and limited contact. Many rely on prayer and spirituality to remain present in their children's lives.
Social Acceptability Role	Mother's role in preparing children to live within social norms and communal expectations.	Due to stigma and societal norms, incarcerated mothers often conceal their status or distance themselves to protect their children from discrimination. Motherhood is through emotional and spiritual support rather than physical presence.

standard results in the alienation of women within their community. However, these views contrast with the experiences of incarcerated mothers as they navigate their maternal role as mothers within prison, a reconstruction of their identity.

Preservation Role: Maternal Identity and Societal Expectations

The preservative demand centers on the mother's responsibility to protect her child's life and ensure their survival. This caregiving imperative is particularly relevant in contexts where physical absence or institutional separation—such as incarceration—makes maternal preservation more complex (Ruddick, 1989). However, many mothers explicitly stated that they cannot fulfill their duties due to being imprisoned. For instance, as recalled by one informant: *"Now, I can only rely on rare calls to express my love... and ask for their forgiveness for not being there. Because what my mother is doing, that should have been me."* Incarcerated mothers attempt to reconstruct their preservation roles through limited channels, such as *'Tawag Kalinga'*. However, there is a limitation: these efforts are inadequate for addressing the full spectrum of parental-child needs and relationships.

Thus, instead of the traditional preservation role, mothers reconstruct and recognize another avenue for preserving their identity as mothers through the roles of advisor and emotional support for their children, though this is notably quite rare. Baldwin (2018) explained that mothers strive to maintain emotional presence and provide security through indirect or symbolic means, including

letters, prayers, and maintaining hope.

Rather than being the caretakers, some were able to renegotiate and become providers, as evidenced by information shared by TADECO employees and some mothers who took up a hobby. However, this provider role also revealed the intersection of class and institutional limitations, as many of the mothers observed were from low to middle-class families. The statement of one respondent further supports this when she stated that:

Matricentric feminism frames these maternal struggles in the patriarchal social norm context as unfair and unequal. By placing a preservation role on mothers in society, it burdens incarcerated mothers, given their inability to fulfill these roles directly, creating an internalized guilt that reflects the structural inequality that fails to address the needs of mothers in prison.

Growth Role: Connecting and Nurturing from Afar

A mother in society plays a crucial role in nurturing her children's growth. This meant the role of mother was confined to contributing to a child's proper upbringing. Ruddick (1989) argues that mothers must foster capacities for resilience, empathy, and curiosity in their children, even in the face of personal hardship. Unsurprisingly, this growth aspect is limited in incarceration; some mothers have a harder time connecting with their families. For instance, as stated by an informant in the relationship of their family, she shares: *"There is a gap now. Before, they liked to call me "Mama... mama" all the time, but now they are*

hesitant because it has been seven years since I was able to go home". This sentiment mirrors findings in Easterling and Feldmeyer's (2017) research, which documents how incarcerated mothers often experience emotional disconnection from their children, alongside an enduring desire to remain influential in their upbringing.

This component, Easterling and Feldmeyer (2017) described, resonates with studies of incarcerated mothers who, despite their confinement, engage in self-improvement efforts and seek ways to guide their children's growth from a distance. A significant number of incarcerated women shared strongly conveyed sentiments of religiosity as a way to express their hope for growth and development for their children. As mentioned by one incarcerated mother: "*I have five children, but I do not know them anymore or where all of them are now because they have grown up. So it is tough and painful, so I just rely on prayers.*" Implicating that most of the incarcerated, instead of directly taking a role, because of distance and other factors, in the growth of their children, instead rely on prayers and spirituality to convey and renegotiate taking the active role into a devout incarcerated mother.

Matricentric feminism's emphasis on intersectionality, particularly on class and status, is revealed in how incarceration can further hamper the mother's role to nurture growth. Given the observed socioeconomic background of most mothers interviewed, financial constraints limit the resources available to visit their mothers and to provide for their children's growth. The reliance on spirituality and prayers underscores the structural inequality and the intersection of class and social aspects hindering incarcerated mothers from fully engaging in their children's growth.

Social Acceptability Role: Stigma and marginalization of Incarcerated Mothers

Mothers expect their children to conform to societal norms. This societal norm reflects on them to their children. To let children be socially accepted, some incarcerated individuals hide their imprisonment to protect their children socially. Thus, as many incarcerated mothers cannot be socially accepted, some rely on abandoning their children as a way to protect them and liberate them from social discrimination. Even Ruddick (1989) has also argued that incarcerated mothers, often marginalized themselves, face heightened challenges in fulfilling this aim.

The incarcerated mother and the reconstruction of motherhood from the barriers and limitations inside the institution is one where motherhood is symbolic for emotional support and religious guidance, rather than a physical and direct

involvement. Further, it may require some mothers to rebuild relationships, especially after incarceration, as emotional and psychological strains, and even to some extent, their physical and psychological aspects have been compromised.

The systemic marginalization reflects a broader failure of patriarchal institutions to provide support for incarcerated mothers and their families, as many mothers from marginalized backgrounds face an intensified stigma with fewer resources to reduce the effects, leaving behind a more vulnerable child in the social environment.

The reconstruction of motherhood among incarcerated mothers unfolds a pivot towards a renegotiated motherhood wherein the preservation, growth, and social acceptability roles are redefined within the confines of prison and systemic inequalities such as class. The data show that while incarcerated mothers were resilient enough to adapt to their environment, they are constrained.

With the foundations of matricentric feminism, we can see that there is a unique and distinct challenge faced by mothers not only due to incarceration but also of the intersecting factors affecting them and their children, such as socioeconomic background. However, we must still recognize the workaround that incarcerated mothers did to provide and give care to their children. Their renegotiated role to be spiritual and emotional guidance, as well as their drive to provide, are testaments to the empowering definition of matricentric feminism, which diverts from a patriarchal normative culture of motherhood.

Conclusion

This study explored how women navigate and negotiate motherhood behind bars. This study specifically sought to explore how incarcerated mothers fulfill their maternal role and to examine the context of motherhood within incarceration.

The results suggest that motherhood in incarceration deviates from the traditional maternal role because of limited visitation, lack of direct caregiving opportunities, and financial constraints, which create a strained relationship with their children and an immense feeling of guilt, loss, and regret among mothers. With this, incarcerated mothers negotiate motherhood by providing emotional and spiritual guidance towards their children rather than a direct caregiver, as traditionally seen in society. Motherhood in the context of mothers in CIW can be seen as taking control of their maternal agency within the incarceration.

These results offer a positive discourse on feminism, suggesting that motherhood can serve as

a unifying, empowering site of liberation, nurture, creativity, and agency, even in incarceration. This is reflected in how mothers navigate and negotiate motherhood in CIW. Their role is to provide spiritual and emotional guidance, and their drive to support others is a testament to the empowering definition of matricentric feminism. However, the distinct limitations of incarcerated mothers having lower socioeconomic status aggravate their condition.

The results suggest that institutional reforms, such as the integration of family support services into the CIW programs, could help incarcerated mothers better maintain their maternal bonds and responsibilities, potentially easing the emotional burden of their separation from their children. There is also a need to update and systematize the profiling of the incarcerated mothers to provide opportunities, especially for those from the lower socioeconomic status, and to promote a more inclusive and responsive program for incarcerated mothers.

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