

BEHIND BARS, BEYOND MOTHERHOOD: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF MOTHERS DEPRIVED OF LIBERTY IN DAGUPAN CITY JAIL, PHILIPPINES

ATRÁS DAS SÉRIES, ALÉM DA MATERNIDADE: EXPERIÊNCIAS VIVIDAS POR MÃES PRIVADAS DE LIBERDADE NA PRISÃO DA CIDADE DE DAGUPAN, FILIPINAS

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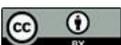
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Abstract

The incarceration of women has been rising globally, with a significant proportion being mothers whose detention disrupts both family structures and child development. In the Philippines, high jail congestion and gender-insensitive correctional systems further complicate the maternal experience of incarceration. This study explored the lived experiences of mothers deprived of liberty (MDLs) in Dagupan City Jail, employing a qualitative Husserlian descriptive phenomenological design. Ten mothers were purposively sampled, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using phenomenological reduction and thematic clustering. Three major themes emerged: (1) Separation Anxiety and Emotional Stress, reflecting grief, longing, and psychological struggles due to limited family contact; (2) Family Settings, which highlighted the reliance on kinship networks for childcare and the strain on marital and familial ties; and (3) Government Development Programs, encompassing livelihood projects, parenting workshops, and faith-based initiatives that foster resilience and skill development. Findings reveal that incarceration produces profound emotional and social challenges but also opens opportunities for personal growth through institutional and familial support. The study underscores the necessity for gender-responsive, family-centered, and rehabilitative interventions that safeguard maternal well-being and strengthen child-caregiver arrangements. Policy reforms should ensure that correctional practices align with human rights standards, thereby reducing intergenerational risks of trauma and criminal involvement. This research contributes to the discourse on justice reform and highlights

Resumo

O encarceramento de mulheres tem aumentado globalmente, com uma proporção significativa sendo mães cuja detenção perturba tanto as estruturas familiares quanto o desenvolvimento infantil. Nas Filipinas, a alta superlotação carcerária e os sistemas correcionais insensíveis ao gênero complicam ainda mais a experiência materna do encarceramento. Este estudo explorou as experiências vividas por mães privadas de liberdade (MPLs) na Cadeia Municipal de Dagupan, empregando um delineamento fenomenológico descritivo husserliano qualitativo. Dez mães foram selecionadas intencionalmente, e os dados foram coletados por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas, transcritas na íntegra e analisadas utilizando redução fenomenológica e agrupamento temático. Três temas principais emergiram: (1) Ansiedade de Separação e Estresse Emocional, refletindo luto, saudade e dificuldades psicológicas devido ao contato familiar limitado; (2) Contextos Familiares, que destacaram a dependência de redes de parentesco para o cuidado infantil e a tensão nos laços conjugais e familiares; e (3) Programas de Desenvolvimento Governamental, abrangendo projetos de subsistência, oficinas para pais e iniciativas religiosas que promovem resiliência e desenvolvimento de habilidades. Os resultados revelam que o encarceramento produz profundos desafios emocionais e sociais, mas também abre oportunidades para o crescimento pessoal por meio do apoio institucional e familiar. O estudo destaca a necessidade de intervenções sensíveis ao gênero, centradas na família e com foco na reabilitação, que protejam o bem-estar materno e fortaleçam os laços entre pais e filhos. As reformas políticas devem



the importance of humanizing correctional management in the Philippine context.

Keywords: Incarcerated Mothers. Lived Experiences. Dagupan City Jail. Gender-responsive Corrections. Maternal Identity.

garantir que as práticas correccionais estejam alinhadas aos padrões de direitos humanos, reduzindo assim os riscos intergeracionais de trauma e envolvimento criminal. Esta pesquisa contribui para o debate sobre a reforma da justiça e destaca a importância de humanizar a gestão correccional no contexto filipino.

Palavras-chave: Mães Encarceradas. Experiências Vividas. Cadeia da Cidade de Dagupan. Correções Sensíveis ao Gênero. Identidade Materna.

1 INTRODUCTION

Women imprisonment has been on the rise globally and they have been made the fastest-growing prison population in several countries. Even though women still maintain a small number compared to men, their rate of imprisonment has skyrocketed over the past 30 years, especially in connection with drugs and poverty (Griffin et al., 2025). In addition, most of these women are mothers who were the main caregivers of their children prior to their incarcerations, pointing to the fact that imprisonment breaks family structures and child development. Compassionately, maternal incarceration-related issues are being identified globally in children, who have become the center of concern, for example, in cases of emotional distress, and attachment insecurity, aside from long-term behavioral risks (Nieva, 2024). This rising group of women is the major reason why incarceration has to be looked at not only as a legal problem but also as a social and developmental issue that affects women and their families.

Moreover, in the Southeast Asia region, the Philippines has one of the highest jail congestion rates to a large extent due to government's tough anti-drug activities and slow judicial processes (Philippine Information Agency [PIA], 2024). The Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP) has pointed out that in some places the congestion rates have gone beyond 120%, which has resulted in overcrowding and the provision of substandard living conditions. Although some changes, e.g., restorative justice and jail decongestion plans, have been made recently (Philippine News Agency [PNA], 2025; Tribune, 2025), the officials still cannot meet the WDL's particular needs. For mothers, the prison time is thus the loss of the mother's freedom, separation from their children,

limited visiting opportunities, and the tiring psychological work of reassuring her that her children are okay.

Motherhood in prison is a completely different and hard to understand experience. Nieva (2024) reported that pregnant inmates in the Philippines are extremely limited in the access to necessary health care, are poorly nourished, and are very much vulnerable to being stigmatized and discriminated against. In the same sense, Griffin et al. (2025) discovered that the incarcerated mothers in Ilocos Norte had often had to submit to the negative effects of guilt, loneliness, and shattered maternal identity, yet at the same time they showed strength as they were capable of keeping contact with their kids by means of letters, visits, or intercessions. The main thread running through these findings is that incarceration alters the experience of motherhood in such a way that it becomes a heavily regulated and controlled by the ruling of the institutions, severely affected by overcrowding and gender-specific vulnerabilities. More than that, it is worth noting that while several countries have already implemented gender-responsive correctional programs, jails in the Philippines are still primarily operating on male-oriented structures, and hence, they are not able to facilitate the psychosocial and maternal wellbeing of women.

Though there is more literature on female prisoners than before, in the main, there are still some big gaps that authors of works in this area have not paid enough attention to. Most of the research has hinged on large-scale prisons or national correctional facilities, whereas there has been less focus on the women detained in city jails, where legal uncertainty is common, and the detention is often prolonged due to congested courts. Jails located in the city, such as Dagupan City Jail, are essential research sites because the women there are in transit (awaiting trial, conviction, or transfer) and have to deal with the dual uncertainties of their legal status and maternal responsibilities. These very conditions elevate their sense of stress, and resilience, and compel them to fight for their identity, something that can hardly be achieved by research conducted in national installations (Griffin et al., 2025).

Magna Carta of Women (Republic Act 9710) is the main policy that points to the need for women prisoners to be given a gender-sensitive treatment such as those in healthcare, sanitary facilities, and the maternal aspect of their lives. Nevertheless, the application of these kinds of provision is still at a different stage. The reports say that the

women in detention still have limited access to services for mental health, the spaces for visiting their children are not sufficient, and there are no created programs for the common areas that are concerned with gender, motherhood, and incarceration (PNA, 2025). Since the Philippine correctional system is changing to more humane and restorative methods, there is a necessity for insights based on different pieces of evidence that show the experiences of mothers behind bars and ensure that frameworks of policy are not only dictated by laws but are also practically responsive.

The current research aims to penetrate the lives of mother inmates at Dagupan City Jail, Bureau of Jail Management, and Penology, studying the subject matter in-depth. To be more precise, it is to get their account of being mothers through incarceration by emphasizing which emotional, social, and institutional problems they came across. The research not only plugs a gap in the area of the local study of maternal incarceration and its implications for gender-sensitive jail management but also provides such implications. Likewise, this research is a major discourse contributor to justice reforms, rehabilitation, and human rights welcome in that it connects the point that incarcerated mothers should not only be treated as offenders but should also be recognized as women going through motherhood in the most unusual way.

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

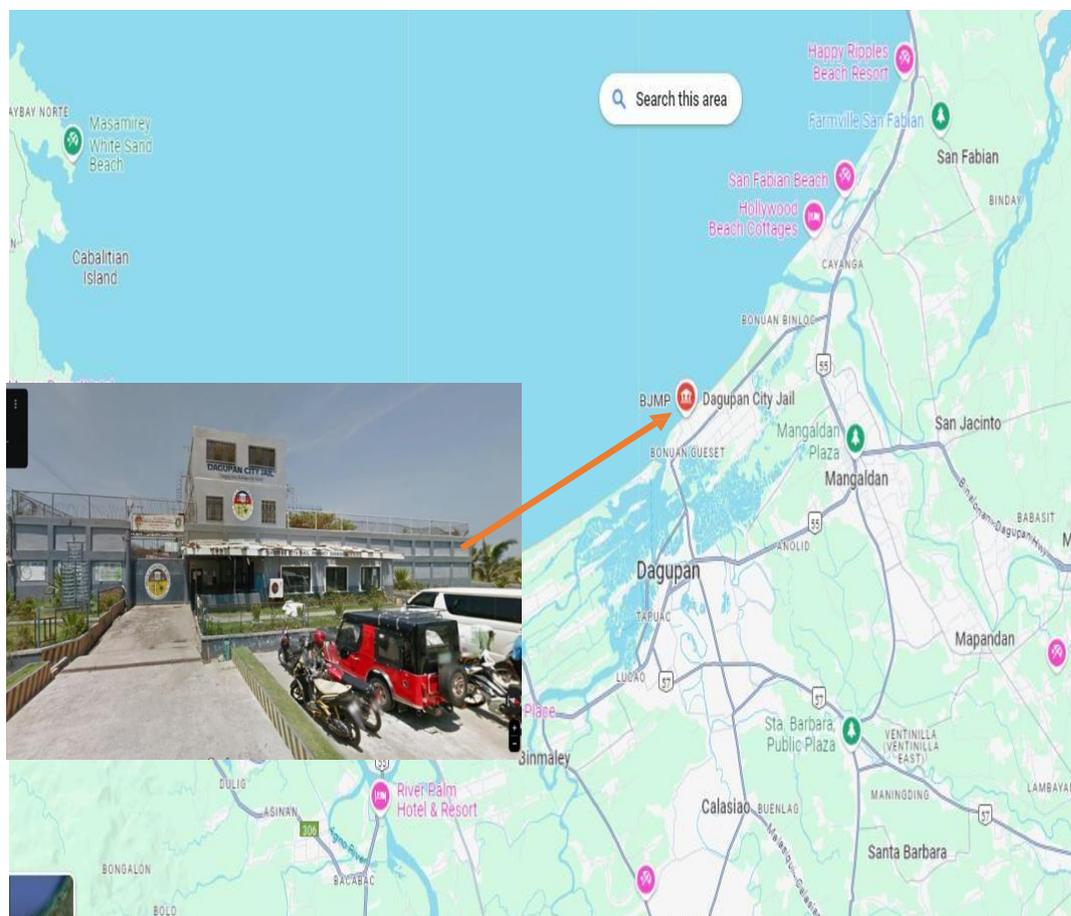
2.1 Research design

The study applied a qualitative method employing Husserlian descriptive phenomenology. Phenomenological research is ideally fitted for an understanding of the lived experience because it seeks to describe phenomena just as they appear to consciousness without incorporating exterior interpretations (Englander, 2012). It was selected as a way to provide a glimpse of the subjective worlds of women detained in Dagupan City Jail as they discussed their experience as a mother and being detained.

2.2 Study site

Figure 1

Map of Dagupan City Jail – Female Dormitory Location.



The study was carried out at the Dagupan City Jail – Female Dormitory, under the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP), Pangasinan, Philippines. The facility is one of the biggest in the province, with more than two times its capacity and holds women who are at different stages of the judicial process. Dagupan City is a 37.23 square kilometer area and has 174,302 people according to the 2020 census, hence it is a regional hub. The female dormitory, which is the place of the study, has a large number of mothers deprived of liberty (MDLs), making it a perfect place for this research (Figure 1).

2.3 Participants

Purposive sampling was used to select ten (10) mothers deprived of liberty as participants from the total of 61 mothers currently incarcerated in the female dormitory. The size of the sample is consistent with the standards of phenomenological research, which suggest 5–25 participants for inclusion to facilitate the in-depth analysis and data saturation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participants were different from each other in age, number of children, length of incarceration and type of offense, thus mirroring a variety of maternal and incarceration situations.

Table 1

Profile of mothers deprived of liberty.

Participant	Length of Stay in Jail	Number of Children	Children's Ages (years)
P1	1 year 3 months	5	18, 16, 8, 6, 4
P2	2 years 1 month	2	10, 4
P3	4 years 5 months	2	7, 5
P4	4 years 3 months	2	10, 7
P5	4 years 7 months	2	27, 21
P6	1 year 10 months	3	5, 4, 2
P7	2 years 6 months	4	22, 13, 12, 3
P8	2 years 4 months	2	12, 9
P9	3 years 2 months	2	7, 4
P10	2 years	1	10

2.4 Instrumentation

The interview schedule was semi-structured so that interviewees could discuss their experience without constraint but maintain consistency across interview sessions. The guide was divided into three sections: (1) preliminary formalities, (2) principal open-ended questions on experiential lives, and (3) summative reflections. The instrument was piloted by three experts—a female jail officer, the female dormitory warden, and the Dean of the Graduate School (Criminology Program).

2.5 Data collection

After clearing with the University Research Ethics Committee as well as with the approval of the BJMP, the researcher discussed with prison authorities the recruitment of respondents. Eligible mothers were oriented on the research where they gave written informed consent. Respondents could give responses orally or in writing. Oral interviews were conducted off-site away from the dorm area, taped with permission, and verbatim transcribed. Written response was also acceptable and interpreted later by follow-up interview. Validation of data was established by means of member checking, that is, presenting the members the transcripts for confirmation and correction.

2.6 Data analysis

Mothers' stories were analyzed by narrative inquiry and phenomenological reduction. Narrative data was transcribed, coded, organized, and then clustered to themes to reveal the essence of mothers' lived experiences. To ensure transparency and rigor, an audit trail was maintained, which contained records of methodological decisions, coding notes, and reflective memos.

2.7 Ethical consideration

Strict observance of ethical measures was made in the light of the vulnerability of the participants. Informed consent was obtained, and the participants were given assurances on voluntary participation, the right to withdraw at any time, and anonymity in presentation. The security of all recordings and transcripts was prioritized; they were only available to the researcher and were deleted one year after the study. The emotional safety of participants was a priority; the continuous provision of the option to call off the interview if any discomfort was experienced was made. Only a small risk was foreseen, which was mainly related to the possibility of emotional upset due to recalling sensitive experiences.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Theme 1. Separation anxiety and emotional stress

Mothers were the ones who most used words that described the emotional distress caused by separation, as well as grief, loneliness, and in some cases, even thoughts of self-harm. Two sub-themes were defined: rarely visited by loved ones and emotional pain and longing.

3.1.1 Rarely visited by loved ones

The main reason for the participants' psychological suffering was that visits took place only seldom. As Participant 1 said:

“I was visited only four times by my loved ones during more than a year.”

Participant 7 shared his point of view:

“I may sometimes decide not to visit because I get sad when they leave. The regular visits would break the sadness inside.”

The stress caused by the lack of frequent family contact worsens. Foster (2015) shows that the inability of an imprisoned mother to maintain contact with her children is correlated with negative mental health and elevated stress levels. In this case, Arditti (2016) also points out that the impact of separation on the mother's psychological health, and the anxiety, depression, and weakening of the parent-child relationship that result, are all long-lasting. The evidence is that while prisons may meet the inmates' material needs, the emotional support from family members is still the most valuable one. The situation of female offenders is described by them as follows: they are at the crossroads when they have to take their maternal responsibilities and at the same time face the difficulties of prison, which calls for the necessity of the regulation of the visiting hours and undertaking communication by different means as a measure to solve this problem (Benning & Lahm, 2016).

3.1.2 Emotional pain and longing

Mothers relayed the deep emotional pain, and longing that they felt as they tried to keep the connection between them and their kids through letters, calls, and prayers. Participant 2 stated:

“Things are tough for me to act like the mother at the same time which is out of here. My children though they don't understand that I do love them, I try to make them realize that through calls and letters even if I am in trouble.”

Participant 8 recalled:

“I feel that every letter of mine that gets the way is like a piece of me that is missing. I am frightened that the physical distance between us is becoming greater.”

Their emotional suffering is caused by a contradictory case--they are not there physically, yet they are supposed to be emotionally accountable. In this sense, the findings of Bucerius and Sandberg (2022) are very much in line with this, where they discovered that maternal separation could lead to the worsening of mental health problems, trauma, and depressive symptoms of those women in prisons. The importance of the theme of loss and longing being repetitively mentioned in several excerpts is that it not only depicts the chronicity of this psychological burden but also the concept of 'ambiguous loss' (Boss, 2006) is being illustrated, where mothers experience a sense of continued loss without closure and it affects their emotional well-being. The contact kept through letters or short visits is the very minimal measure to successfully prevent relational disruption and at the same time facilitate emotional coping. The presented evidence can be interpreted as an argument for the implementation of policies that could contribute to this issue in a way that would be conducive to a constant, planned interaction with one's offspring as well as the consultation of a family therapist being part of the mental health risk factors and facilitating the development of resilience (Tremblay & Sutherland, 2017; Aiello & McQueeney, 2016).

3.2 Theme 2. Family settings

While incarcerations have always been a source of disruptions in families, the changes that were caused by jail situations were mostly the need to move the care-giving

role to either grandparents, other relatives, or sometimes the neighbors. Out of these changes in family dynamics, two main sub-themes were identified: primary caregiver for children and family relationships.

3.2.1 Primary caregiver for children

The first issue raised by the participants was the extended family being the main caregivers for children. Participant 1 commented:

"My children are being looked after by my parents while I am not at home because of my imprisonment."

Along with this, Participant 4 mentioned:

"My children were divided; some are under the care of relatives, and the rest with neighbors to make sure someone is looking after them."

Dependence on extended family points to the significant role of family and friends support in keeping things normal for children (Mancini et al., 2016). Although such measures provide for kids' necessities, they can hardly imitate the presence of parents that is the perfect source of children's emotional needs. The evidence suggests that the teen children of imprisoned mothers might experience educational setbacks, behavior problems, and emotional challenges (Tremblay & Sutherland, 2017; Poehlmann-Tynan & Turney, 2021). The issue of support implementation for the prison mother along with the caregivers is raised; so that proper parenting and the needed emotional support for children can be given at all times.

3.2.2 Family relationships

Participants talked about the different family cohesion experiences. Participant 6 mentioned:

"My partner separated himself from me emotionally after I went to jail."

On the opposite side, Participant 10 indicated:

"My family is the reason I am still filled with hope and that I will be able to deal with separation."

Family relationships could be a source of both resilience and stress. The imprisonment of the mother might cause the strain of the marital and familial ties, therefore, separation or emotional withdrawal are the possibilities to be followed (Cooper-Sadlo et al., 2019). However, positive support networks lessen the psychological distress and promote adaptive coping strategies. So, the results suggest the interventions to be concentrated on the measures of family communication, by offering support to marital relationships thus, counseling services to incarcerated mothers and their family members (Dhiman, 2022; Halter, 2018).

3.3 Theme 3. Government development programs

Participants recognized the role of institutional programs in dealing with incarceration. The sub-themes were the main streams of livelihood, parenting, and faith-based activities.

3.3.1 Livelihood programs

Participants informed that programs for the promotion of livelihoods mitigated the emotions of isolation and contributed to the acquisition of practical skills. Participant 6 said:

"We love to manufacture goods for the livelihood program which is our way to get rid of loneliness and give us hope."

Livelihood programs are the means through which the empowerment of the prisoners and the acquisition of skills take place, and these are the most essential elements for the successful reintegration back into the community after release (Gallant et al., 2015). By being productive in their work, the incarcerated mothers build up self-efficacy, minimize the time of being idle, and accumulate the resources that will facilitate them in reestablishing ties with their families. The researches that marry income generation with the provision of vocational skills have demonstrated that such a strategy can lower recidivism rates and also improve prisoners' psychological welfare (Fedock & Covington, 2017).

3.3.2 Parenting workshops and family visits

Participant 2 stressed:

“The parenting workshop educates me on how I can be a better parent back home.”

Participant 5 furthered:

“Family visits and workshops offer a lifeline in keeping up contact with kids.”

Parenting programs provide detainees with skill-sets for managing the particular dilemmas involved with "parenting from inside" (Aiello & McCorkel, 2018). They reinforce maternal identity, boost self-esteem, and provide for the instillation of prosocial behavior that will benefit the child as much as the mother. A measure of success is built in by evidence demonstrating its programmatic parenting programs will decrease intergenerational criminality as much as increase family cohesion on release (Atkin-Plunk & Armstrong, 2018; Cooper-Sadlo et al., 2019).

3.3.3 Faith-Based and skill-building activities

Participant 8 answered:

"I try to Learn something by enrolling in the courses they offer so that I can equip myself for the real world."

Religious events and skills-acquisition programs have a positive effect on the personality of the participants and also help them to keep on going (Acevedo et al., 2024). The involvement of religious figures in schools and programs on religious activities is an indication of the use of adaptive coping strategies, which, relieving the psychological tension, also teach them skills that are of relevance for their reintegration process. The study by Skowroński and Talik (2018) reveals that vocational, educational, and spiritual activities foster social integration and quality of life for women imprisoned. The jail mothers' narratives teem with the paradox of the situation: incarceration is traumatic and emotionally impactful on them, on the other hand, it rages with possibilities of them being empowered through programmatic and family support. Their experiences' major themes are separation from family members, family disruption, and emotional distress, while at the same time, kinship, religious beliefs, and government programs turn out to be the

indispensable tents that protect them from the storm. The findings reveal the need for gender-sensitive, family-centered, and rehabilitative approaches to empower maternal influence in prison detentions up to as far as post-release. Satisfaction of these needs not merely helps maternal mental health but also contributes in lowering child development and the perpetration of crime across generations.

4 CONCLUSION

The oral histories of imprisoned mothers in Dagupan City Jail give an overview of how various elements of maternal identity, emotional suffering, and institutional realities interlink. Incarceration, as a norm, unravels the composition of the family, so much separation anguish, desolation, and other complications exist, and on top of that, mothers find themselves in a place where they need to struggle for their rights as mothers from the prison. Despite these calamities, the respondents were still capable of demonstrating their strength of spirit in the reciprocal encouragement of family members, livelihood initiatives, religious activities, and parenting seminars. This finding identifies the pressing need for gender-sensitive penal interventions that respect the particular vulnerabilities of mothers so that prison will no longer be a source of the perpetuation of trauma as well as underprivileged. In a nutshell, exposure to the oral histories of these women is a strong case for jail administration humanization as well as drives reforms that will ensure maternal wellness, early child development, as well as family unification.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS

Amongst other suggestions to policymakers as well as jail authorities is the use of complete as well as gender-sensitive interventions that put psychosocial as well as family requirements first for women that have had their liberty taken away. Alongside other suggestions, the enhancement of institutional visitation programs, accessible counseling sessions on a large scale, as well as parenting workshops will allow individuals a chance to relieve emotional distress as well as maintain maternal ties intact. Offering more livelihood and vocational opportunities can be a source of empowerment for the inmates and can also make their release and re-entry into the society easier. In addition, the

establishment of visiting areas that are child-friendly, the improvement of communication possibilities and offering support to caregivers outside prison can be some of the measures that would ensure that children receive holistic care. Lastly, there is a need for national policies such as the Magna Carta of Women which should be consistently implemented in local jails so that institutional operations can be in line with human rights and restorative justice principles.

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Authors' Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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