

Interpersonal dynamics, violence and distrust in a women's prison in Slovenia

Interpersonal violence in prisons is a prevalent issue, equally characteristic of female and male correctional facilities. This article provides an in-depth analysis of the interpersonal dynamics associated with violence in Slovenia's sole female correctional institution, Ig Prison. Based on data from interviews with staff, focus groups with prisoners and sociometric testing conducted in 2019, we examine the broader interpersonal relationships within the prison and their connections to violence, with a specific focus on the pervasive distrust that suffuses most interactions within the facility. By exploring violence and distrust, we first analyze the relationships among the inmates, followed by the dynamics between the staff and prisoners. Finally, we discuss how distrust functions as a unique "engagement with the world" and a survival strategy within the prison context. This study thus aims to shed light on the intricate interplay between violence and social relations in a (female) prison.

Keywords: Ig Prison, violence, distrust, interpersonal dynamics, strategies for survival, prison culture

Introduction

Violence within prisons has garnered significant attention from scholars and researchers alike. Numerous studies have addressed various aspects of violence in prisons, such as individual and group factors (Schenk & Fremouw, 2012; Butler, McNamee & Kelly, 2022), overcrowding (Baggio et al., 2020), environmental factors (Atlas, 1984; Gaes & McGuire, 1985) and violence prevention (Steiner & Wooldredge, 2019). Indeed, violence seems to be one of the most thoroughly studied topics of research on prisons and incarceration and is a phenomenon present across a wide range of prisons. As Sykes (2007) argued, one of the core pains that prison causes is the experience of being unsafe amid living with people who may be threatening or are understood as such. "Threats to safety and well-being are embedded in the world of the prison", argue Owen, Wells and Pollock (2017: 3), and "violence /.../ continuously exists as a potential, shaped by time, place, prison culture, interpersonal relationships, and staff actions" (ibid.: 14). Less attention concerning violence in prison contexts, however, has been devoted to violence among women (Owen 1998). Existing research, however, points to an equal presence of violence in women's prisons, but in a specific gendered form—while there is a lower frequency of acts of physical violence, psychological and relational violence tend to be prevalent (see e.g. Trammell 2009; Owen, Wells and Pollock 2017: 16). The prison in Ig appears to be no exception to the presence of interpersonal violence (see Tadič 2018). This is the only prison in the country that houses female convicts and is located in the central area of Slovenia, close to its capital city. It is a relatively small prison (with the number of prisoners in the last ten years fluctuating between 59 and 97) and has in the past been the site of an "experiment" in the 1970s, which aimed to soften the control within its walls and implement a less repressive, more rehabilitative

approach to its management; such a regime then became implemented as regular practice for about two decades. While this attempt was deemed successful and fruitful, new leadership in the prison soon after taking over in the beginning of the 1990s initiated a new turn toward heightened control (Petrovec, 2018; Petrovec & Muršič 2011; Petrovec & Plesničar 2014). The repressiveness of the regime in the prison additionally heightened in recent years with increasingly strict state penal policies, the increase of which, as Tadič (2018) illustrated, is steeper in the area of female convicts than in that of male convicts. Tadič's research (2018) in this prison highlights the prevalence of gender-specific interpersonal violence and illustrates the pervasiveness of feelings of insecurity and lack of safety among convicts in the prison. Furthermore, it also points to the widespread presence of a "culture of distrust" in the prison.

In this paper, we attempt to build on previous research conducted by Tadič (2018) and to further analyze the dynamics of violence in the framework of social relations in the Ig Prison. We base our discussions in this paper on the assumption that violence is not an isolated phenomenon but rather arises from an interplay of various group dynamics. We aim to explain in what ways and to what degree interpersonal dynamics play a role in the dynamics of violence. Consequently, in this research paper, we will focus on the relationships that women prisoners form in prisons. After a brief outline of our research methodology, we will discuss the results of our field study in three subchapters. First, we will focus on the relations among female prisoners in women's prisons. Second, we will explicate the dynamics of relations between prisoners and staff. Third, we will take into account prisoners' experiences of violence and distrust and strategies for coping with them. In the last chapter, a discussion on the rehabilitative functions of Slovene prisons will follow, taking into account the development of distrust as a "mode of engagement" (cf. Mühlfried 2018), which might be transferred to the outside of prison walls.

Methodology

This chapter is based on research by Tadič and colleagues¹ in the women's prison in Ig as part of a government-funded research project on violence in women's prisons. The field research lasted from 27 May 2019 to 10 September 2019 and was based primarily on the use of qualitative methods. It was structured in three distinct phases. The first phase, through which the researchers "entered the field", encompassed conducting interviews with both prisoners and staff on the topic of violence in prison and the main problematics related to it. The second phase involved sociometric analysis of relations among prisoners, whereas staff members completed questionnaires on their knowledge of the relations among prisoners. The third and most in-depth research phase involved conducting focus groups with female convicts in the prison, with the main topic being interpersonal violence, its forms and manifestations as well as the factors leading to it.

¹ The project was carried out as part of the Faculty of Education's small research projects scheme, which aims to promote small research teams of students and researchers to work together. The project, entitled "Forms and contexts of violence among imprisoned women", was carried out by the team members: Darja Tadič (member of the Department of Social Pedagogy and project coordinator) and students of Social Pedagogy: Petra Polajžer, Eva Margon, Zala Rejc, Ana Lovšin and Neva Mole.

In the first phase, 31 semi-structured short interviews lasting approximately 10 minutes were conducted with staff members (out of 45 staff members employed at that time), and 38 interviews were conducted with prisoners (out of 51 who were incarcerated at the time). In the second phase, sociometric techniques were used among 36 prisoners to determine the nature of the social relations among them. This meant that prisoners were asked to fill in their answers to questions asking for the names of prisoners with whom they got on best. In the second part of phase two, 31 members of prison staff were asked to participate in a survey that asked them to identify the most liked and least liked, most controversial and most overlooked prisoners, the purpose of which was to gain insight into the degree to which staff is acquainted with relations among prisoners. Finally, cycles of focus groups with 24 prisoners were conducted in five separate groups (which included 4 to 7 participants), and these groups were formed based on the results of sociometric testing. Each of these groups met five times over five consecutive weeks for approximately one and a half hour to discuss various topics related to violence in their prison. Conversations that occurred throughout the focus groups were transcribed and anonymised. These transcripts were later analyzed through thematic analysis, whereby recurring themes and patterns were identified and analyzed (see e.g. Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2017).

Results and discussion

Most of the data collected from our participants focused on interpersonal relations in the prison and prisoners' experiences of interpersonal dynamics. We will discuss these interpersonal dynamics throughout the next three subchapters, which address relations among prisoners, relations among prisoners and staff, and distrust as a particular form of engagement.

Relations among prisoners

When talking of their experience in the women's prison in Ig, the prisoners who were our interlocutors consistently indicated that social rejection is a common phenomenon in the prison. Moreover, sociometric testing showed that none of the prisoners were well liked or had a high social influence. Good interpersonal relations among convicts were rare, and many characterized social relations in prisons as hierarchical and lacking in solidarity.

“You must socialize here; it's a fact. However, you can't have friends.”

Group dynamics were similarly described as negative, and sociometric testing revealed weak group cohesiveness. The valence of these overall non supportive relations was additionally impacted by lies, manipulations and gossiping, which seemed to be prevalent in interpersonal dynamics among prisoners in Ig at the time of our study.

“Some talk like that, [but] act differently. Most are two-faced, there is a lot of manipulation.”

“There is a lot of hypocrisy and scheming here.”

These dynamics were experienced negatively by our interlocutors, and they contributed to enforcing distrust in their cohabitants.

“You can't have friends, confidants...”

We have found distrust was pervasive in prison. On the one hand, it was mutually reinforced in concrete everyday interactions among prisoners, through the perpetration of acts by other prisoners, which are considered immoral—offensive behaviour, lies, manipulations, etc. On the other hand, distrust was engendered by being in prison as such. Prison is understood as a place that collects and contains individuals of suspect moral status, and incarceration communicates its own moral messages (cf. Ievins 2023). Living in such a place and being in close proximity to stigmatized moral Others presents a danger of contamination (cf. Douglas 1992; Ievins 2023: 43-4), and distance is needed to avoid unwanted “moral transfer” (cf. Eskine, Novreske & Richards 2013)—the distance that prison as a setting does not afford. Consequently, many prisoners expressed dislike of others incarcerated in the Ig prison and tended to view them as untrustworthy and often as “worse” than themselves. As one of our interlocutors said,

“If you have a women's prison, it should be a decent prison, to know who is who, why they're here, what kind of sentence they have, and to be able to separate this nicely. That normal ones are [together] with normal ones and those not normal [should be together] with those not normal.”

Social stratification is thus common, with certain groups—primarily groups referred to as “addicts”, “recidivists” and “murderers” by imprisoned women – being at the lowest end of the hierarchy.

“They should separate the women and not lump us all together – I cannot be together with murderers and addicts!”

Moreover, our interlocutors consistently stressed the presence of psychological violence, primarily in the form of threats, provocations and offensive speech, in their interpersonal relations. These were, according to our interlocutors, prevalent forms of interpersonal violence that they experience daily.

“Because here the girls – here, there's no physical violence, but there is a lot of verbal violence, especially blackmailing, when you trust someone with something, right...”

These relationship dynamics as described here are grounded in the normative frameworks of prisoners. They are perceived negatively; manipulations, lies and scheming on the one hand, and more tangible forms of psychological violence on the other, are understood by prisoners as morally wrong. They dislike such dynamics but often find it unavoidable to perpetuate them. In a bounded space where cohabiting with other people is necessary, participation in interpersonal dynamics is required. Participating in such dynamics, however, is most commonly reflected in a distrustful attitude of engagement, which contributes to creating distance in social relations and low social cohesiveness (Mühlfried 2018). Despite the fact that distrust permeated almost all everyday interpersonal interactions, trust was also occasionally present. Moreover, forms of solidarity were forged through common activities such as playing cards, drinking coffee, dancing or helping each other in urgent situations.

“I had an epileptic seizure; the girls, the girls always helped me”.

Relationships between prisoners and prison staff

Whereas the normative frameworks that guide relations among prisoners are relatively straightforward and similar to those that exist outside of prisons, those that guide relations between prisoners and prison staff are more ambivalent. The ambivalence in the perception of prison staff is tied to the conflictual role that is ascribed to employees in prisons. On the one hand, their role demands are to offer help and develop supportive relations with prisoners, while on the other hand, they are also responsible for executing sanctioning and punishments for the same prisoners (see e.g. Hepburn & Albonetti, 1980). However, many members of the staff in the Ig Prison expressed disinterest in developing close relations with the female convicts and preferred to maintain distance in such relations. As one member of the staff told us, this is sometimes done out of fear of being manipulated by the prisoners.

“They can trick you very quickly, they see kindness [and they] use it.”

Similarly, another one of our interlocutors stated the following when talking about their relationship to the prisoners:

“You can’t be too good and too honest.”

Such an approach was also supported by the management; staff were of the opinion that creating warm relations with prisoners was not approved by those responsible for running the prison.

“We were told to talk as little as possible with them [prisoners]”

As is evident from these statements, at the time of our fieldwork, there was a firm divide in place between staff and prisoners, accepted and perpetuated by prison staff. It was reflected in an “us and them” mental scheme (cf. Linberg 2005) that seemed to be present in both groups. This was further expressed in the dynamics of distrust which shaped relations on both sides of this boundary. With the occasional exception of some staff members who attempted to form meaningful and supportive relations with prisoners, the staff rarely attempted to significantly bridge the boundaries between them. This boundary tended to be reaffirmed by the prisoners as well, who viewed staff members as uninvolved and unreliable.

“I don’t know if the educators are here to bullshit or to help you. But they don’t help you.”

“When everything is nice, when you’re having a good time and everything is fine, the guards destroy it. When things are not okay and you need them, they make fun; they don’t listen.”

The lack of staff involvement was reflected in high levels of distrust by the prisoners toward them.

“If you confide in the employees, they have their own personal agenda”.

Distrust in relational engagements that from both sides reaffirm the boundary between the two groups engenders more distrust in their relationships. This is reflected in the experience one of the prisoners shared with us:

“They tell us nonstop, you have to trust us, you have to trust us, we wish well for you, you need to trust us. How can we trust you when you don’t trust us?”

Benefits and sanctions

Distrust on the side of the prisoners was additionally strengthened by their perception of the arbitrariness of prison rules.

“The employees. One tells you yes, the other no. And now you don't know anything anymore.”

Confusion as to how the rules function was especially evident in the areas of granting benefits and sanctioning. Prisoners perceived the power of prison employees upon their lives as being significant, as they are the ones who determine exits, conditional releases, etc. These represent some of the most important objectives of incarcerated women, yet the pathways to them remain unclear to them and are perceived to be largely dependent upon inconsistent and arbitrary decision-making.

“Here, they blackmail us, if you won’t do this and that, you won’t get leave and so on /.../ they exploit us with leaves and holidays. If you won’t work you won’t get leave².”

Narratives about the injustice in distributing benefits among women are also common:

“Some get a benefit immediately, while others really try, try, try /.../ but don't get it /.../. Someone will actually work, won't be problematic, won't do this, won't do that, [but still] won't get [it].”

Similar injustice is perceived by prisoners when talking about sanctions. This was especially salient in situations where they were victims of violence committed by others but were themselves sanctioned.

“If I say now that I feel threatened by someone, they won’t move that person. They’ll move me for my own safety. But she’ll find another victim, and persist with her...”

Such perceptions of differential treatment in the sanctioning system drawn upon by the prison staff, argued by Erez, may even engender in the prisoners “a distrust for the system” (1987: 17) as such.

Snitching

A number of studies have shown that moral condemnation of snitching is common in prison contexts (see e.g. Åkerström 1988; Ugelvik 2014: 218-), as it means the crossing of the boundary “between prisoners on the one side and the System and its representatives on

² Prison leave is in the Slovene prison system used as a benefit/reward for fulfilling the personalized plan and following the “house” rules of the institutions. Taking them away for “improper” behavior is thus part of the sanctions and rewards policies of the Slovene carceral system (see e.g. URSIKS 2022).

the other” (Ugelvik 2014: 218-9). As expected, our interlocutors often condemned the practice of snitching, but the condemnation was not absolute. A high level of moral ambiguity was present in the narratives about snitching and snitchers, which is indicative of the ambivalence that is tied to the roles of prison employees. As prison guards are distrusted, snitching is considered negative, and many of our interlocutors expressed dislike for snitchers. Consequently, most instances of violence among prisoners often remain hidden from prison employees. However, it was also not uncommon to hear of snitching as a self-evident reaction when it was provoked by another prisoner.

“If someone cornered me or something, I know I’d go to the guards... definitely.”

Despite the distrust permeating the interpersonal relations between prisoners and prison employees, convicts are aware of their dependence on the staff and may seek their help – even if they perceive it as unlikely that it will extend past the concrete conflictual situation. Even in concrete situations in which prisoners seek help, staff often feel that little can be formally done due to difficulties in finding proof of violence. The divide between informal observations and bureaucratic processes often makes suitable reactions to violence by the staff difficult. The perceived ineffectiveness of the staff when dealing with information about violence, however, leads back to engendering distrust toward them from the prisoners.

Strategies for survival in a culture of distrust

One of the core topics that we encountered through our research and that cropped out particularly often in the narratives of our interlocutors was thus distrust, as is visible in the above two subchapters. The references to distrust crop up abundantly in narratives about relations among prisoners, and significantly inform the talk on relations among staff and prisoners; indeed, both “sides” consider the other to be untrustworthy. Distrust had been implicitly, and often explicitly, present in almost all descriptions of interpersonal dynamics in Ig Prison. This is not an idiosyncrasy of the women’s prison in Ig; however, it seems to be firmly embedded in the functioning of the prison as such. Greer (2002), for example, in her description of relations among female convicts in the context of a women’s prison, claims that due to the “inherent interpersonal distrust that prison perpetuates, most of the women hesitated to share their feelings with any but their closest associates in the institution” (ibid.: 134). A similar argument – that distrust is embedded in prison dynamics – is made by Ugelvik, who, when describing the strong divide between prisoners and staff, states that “institutionalized professional distrust is built into the routines of the institution and is a vital part of the prison officer's role” (2022: 627).

Distrust, however, is rarely studied as its own construct, as opposed to trust. While research on trust in prisons has made headway in recent years (Johnsen, Granheim, & Helgesen 2011; Liebling & Arnold 2012; Linberg 2005; Ugelvik 2022), distrust tends to be often written off as simply being the opposite end of the trust continuum (see Hawley 2014; Mühlfried 2018). This, however, is conceptually inaccurate, as distrust has been shown to be a separate construct from trust, and consequently forms its own distinct continuum (Hawley 2012: 8-9; Lewicki, McAllister & Bies 1998; Mühlfried 2018: 10-13). It is thus not the opposite of trust; rather, both can coexist as distinct modes of relating to the environment

Distrust is thus a particular form of engagement (Mühlfried 2018:16), a “mode of relating to human beings and the world as a whole” (ibid. 11), one that engenders distance and weakening of social ties (ibid.). It should not be surprising, then, that according to the prisoners of the Ig prison, the most common strategies for managing conflict and violence are primarily individualized modes of (dis)engagement. Many women consider withdrawal from the conflictive situation to be one possible strategy for avoiding being victimized.

“At the beginning, I was wondering why some girls tend to be by themselves; they just say “hi”, “good morning”, and that’s it. I said, how can you survive twenty-four hours on your own? She doesn’t hang out with anyone, isn’t interested in anything; if she is working, she works. She goes to her room, and you don’t see her anywhere. And now I understand that that’s the smartest thing [to do].”

Indeed, some of the prisoners understand withdrawal as the only possible strategy for getting by in their prison.

“You have to isolate yourself to survive.”

On the other hand, some prisoners also stressed the need to attack others to protect themselves (cf. Owen, Wells & Pollock, 2017), expressed most commonly in the idiomatic Slovene phrase “showing one’s teeth”, which indicates the need to fight back and stand one’s ground.

“You need to show your teeth /.../, be strong.”

Standing up for themselves was a way for convicts to carve out a position where they would no longer be attacked.

“I said [this is] the first and last time and you should never again throw an insult. From then on, it’s been peaceful, it’s okay, normal, as if nothing happened.”

Group strategies for managing conflictive relations and dealing with violence were much less common, as women perceived themselves as being on their own in finding ways to cope with it. Making use of individualized strategies for dealing with interpersonal violence – violence that permeates group dynamics in Ig – reflects the widespread “culture of distrust” (cf. Lindberg 2005) in prison. Indeed, some of our interlocutors made it clear that prison taught them particular strategies for dealing with conflict and violence, strategies that they would not make use of on the outside where supportive relationship networks exist.

“At Ig, you have to learn how to protect yourself differently than on the outside. Definitely!”

Conclusion

The culture of distrust that permeates the Ig Prison significantly affects the dynamics of violence in various ways. First, its effects are visible in the way it shapes interpersonal relationships among prisoners. Second, it determines how employees become involved in these dynamics. Lastly, it structures prisoners’ strategies for coping with conflictive and violent situations. Within a culture of distrust, Sztompka claims, people are “constrained to

exhibit /.../ distrust in all their dealings, independent of individual convictions, and departures from such a cultural demand meet with a variety of sanction” (1996: 42). Such learned distrust, Hardin argues, is one of the most harmful long-term consequences of incarceration, as it makes convicts “less fit for return to society than they would otherwise be” (2002: 106-7). Furthermore, as he claims, distrust is hard to unlearn even when the conditions that engender it may change. Moreover, as distrust becomes embodied in a habituated person, it may impact relationships formed outside of prison. Concurrently, learned individualized strategies for dealing with conflict and violence in prisons may be transferred to the outside world where they may prove to be ill-suited within its framework. These concerns are especially relevant in the context of Slovene penal policies. In Slovenia, prison regimes are formally required to follow rehabilitative logic in their operation. This, however, has in practice been negatively affected by an increase in punitiveness in the country’s policies, which has been on the rise since the neoliberalization of Slovenia in the late 1990s (see e.g. Flander & Meško, 2016: 568; Plesničar & Drobnjak, 2019). In this research, we hoped to highlight the pervasiveness of interpersonal psychological violence occurring within the context of a culture of distrust in Ig Prison. We argued that both violence and distrust are intimately tied to the wider prison culture and regime. Therefore, attempts to influence forms, prevalence or intensity of violence among imprisoned individuals must surpass the idea of personality or behavior changes of individuals who are marked as “problematic” or “violent”; rather, prison violence interventions ought to be tightly linked to changes in prison culture. This, among others, also implies challenging increasingly punitive state policies that work toward adding further strain to already harsh prison environments.

We feel that further concluding remarks are necessary. While we do make the claim that violence and culture of distrust are embedded in the wider prison culture and regime, our findings do not imply that this characteristic is specific to women’s prisons. Further and careful research about how (and whether) these findings could be understood as gender-specific is still needed.

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