

Motherhood in prison - challenges and perspectives

The authors have analysed the status, treatment and needs of imprisoned mothers and their children. They point out that, almost everywhere in the world, children of incarcerated mothers are not given adequate attention, and that their very specific needs are neglected, although this directly contradicts the international standards and the principle of protecting the best interests of the child. In order to make recommendations that could upgrade the realization of rights of incarcerated mothers and their children left behind, the authors have reviewed the scientific and professional literature, focusing on the possible negative effects of parental detention and practices that have been shown to contribute to the well-being and social reintegration of both children and their mothers. International legal documents have also been analysed. General recommendations that have been given relate to the justice and prison systems, social welfare, schools and the media.

Keywords: imprisonment, mother, child, Bangkok rules, Serbia

Introduction

It is estimated that millions of children around the world are the offspring of imprisoned parents, and these children often belonged to disadvantaged groups even before their parents were incarcerated (Robertson, 2007: 8). According to Penal Reform International, 1.4 million children are separated from their mothers in prison (2023), while Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE) estimates that 37,000 children in the European Union are separated from their mothers who have been deprived of their liberty at any given time (Irish Penal Reform Trust, 2023). The literature states that in countries such as Brazil, Russia and the United States of America (USA), female prisoners are also mothers in 80% of cases (UNODC, 2014: 18). It should be noted that, in contrast to the male prison population, the number of women in prison has risen rapidly worldwide in recent decades (Ignjatović & Ljubičić: 2011). In Asia, for example, women have been sentenced to prison much more frequently since 2000, with the number of women in prison in Cambodia increasing ninefold, while a similar trend has been observed in Central America, so that the number of female prisoners in Guatemala has increased sixfold (Penal Reform International: 2023).

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It is undeniable that the needs of children of imprisoned parents are a neglected issue almost everywhere in the world. It has been observed that children of incarcerated parents are also quite invisible in the field of academic research (Huebner & Gustafson, 2007; Murray, 2005: 442). It is often pointed out in the literature that the children of prisoners are collateral victims who are not considered, both during the ongoing criminal proceedings and during and after the execution of criminal sanctions. This is confirmed by the fact that in many countries there is no data on the number of children whose parents are in prison (Dzierżyńska-Breś, 2017: 130). In the literature, children of imprisoned parents are referred to as 'orphans of justice', 'forgotten victims' of crime and 'Cinderellas of penology' (Murray, 2005: 446).

The aim of the paper is to identify relevant recommendations whose implementation could improve the situation of incarcerated mothers and their children, both at a normative level and, more importantly, in practice. To address the issue, we have conducted a rapid systematic review. So, the study is based on a review of the relevant literature and legal documents, applying the systemic and teleological method of interpretation as well as the normative-dogmatic method.

Effects of parental imprisonment

During the criminal proceedings and the imprisonment of the parents, children find themselves in stressful situations, which then continue and become even more complicated during the serving of the sentence. Children often have to support and comfort the remaining family members. They experience a discontinuity in previous routines and have to move to a new neighbourhood or a new school. Add all of this to the fact that, at some point, the incarcerated parent returns home after a longer or shorter period of time, and that the dynamics of family relationships have often changed significantly (Robertson, 2007: 7). It is therefore not surprising that the imprisonment of parents is counted among the most important adverse childhood experiences (abbreviated: ACEs). ACEs are experiences that are not common in typical child development, so they often exceed children's coping resources (Finkelhor, 2020).

The literature indicates that the consequences of a parent's imprisonment for a child can be significant and far-reaching. It has been found that children of incarcerated parents exhibit emotional and psychological problems and have difficulty coping with schoolwork (Huebner & Gustafson, 2007; Venema et al, 2022). Children of prisoners are discriminated against and stigmatized because of their parents' actions and suffer from trauma, fear, guilt and low self-esteem. Feelings of abandonment and helplessness have been identified (UNODC, 2014). It has been observed that children of incarcerated parents are more likely to hang out with peers who engage in deviant behaviour and that they withdraw from prosocial groups in search of support and acceptance (Hoffmann et al, 2010: 399). In this context, it is emphasized that warmth and consistency in the mother-child relationship could contribute to antisocial behaviour manifesting less frequently (Kovačević Lepojević & Kovačević, 2017). It is often reported that the affectionate bond and good communication with the mother have a stronger protective effect on the development of adolescents than that with the father (Kovačević Lepojević et al, 2020). The absence of a parent potentially disrupts relationships with other household members and the problems can manifest

themselves in the form of social withdrawal, deterioration in health, nocturnal enuresis (bedwetting), decline in school performance, running away from school and even aggressive and criminal behaviour (Robertson, 2007: 9). The literature points out that the children of prisoners are at a significantly higher risk of being sentenced to prison in future than their peers whose parents were not imprisoned. A longitudinal study conducted in the USA, involving 1250 mothers and 1697 adult children, found that there was a positive correlation between the mother's imprisonment and the child's subsequent conviction (Huebner & Gustafson, 2007: 292).

However, it should be underlined that the literature also states that there is actually no relevant evidence of a direct and causal relationship between children's criminal behaviour and their parents' serving a prison sentence (Murray, 2005: 447). Indeed, when discussing the effects of parental imprisonment, it should be borne in mind that it is not possible to separate the consequences that arise from separation due to serving a prison sentence from those caused by the presence of other risk factors in children's lives, such as previous parental neglect, substance abuse, violence and extreme poverty (Jones & Wainaina-Woźna, 2013: 508). For example, a comparative study found that the criminal behaviour of the offspring of prisoners in England is significantly higher than the criminal behaviour of the children of prisoners in Sweden. The study pointed to the potentially protective influence of Swedish social policy, which is very much geared towards meeting the diverse needs of prisoners' children, with child-friendly policies also being applied in prisons when it comes to building and maintaining relationships between a prisoner and a child. This is important, as the study shows, not only as an issue of generational transmission of criminality, but also in light of the impact on children's mental health and well-being (Jones & Wainaina-Woźna, 2013: 142).

It has been observed that the negative consequences of imprisoning a mother are more profound compared to the consequences of imprisoning a father (Irish Penal Reform Trust, 2023), which is partly due to the fact that fathers are less likely to be the children's main carers at the time they are sent to prison (Healy et al, 2000). For example, a study conducted in the USA found that 64% of mothers lived with their children at the time of the offence, while only 44% of fathers shared a household with their offspring (Murray, 2005: 452). Studies conducted worldwide show that the imprisonment of the mother has particularly serious consequences for the children and the family, as if the father is imprisoned, the mother remains in the household with the children (UNODC, 2014). On the other hand, if the mother is incarcerated, the child is often left without a family and home, as mothers are more often single parents, so that an alternative placement must be arranged for the child, which may include institutional care (Turney & Goodsell, 2018: 150). Similarly, the literature indicates that the parental role of the imprisoned mother is informally evaluated more harshly compared to the role of the imprisoned father and that the mother is reprimanded more intensely and told more directly that she needs to improve and be more responsible with her parental duties (Breuer et al., 2021). The literature also points out that mothers experience particular stress and uncertainty when they do not know where and how their children will be cared for, while anxiety is exacerbated for mothers with multiple children who may be placed with different people or institutions (UNODC, 2014: 19).

Regarding incarcerated mothers, a meta-analytic study of experiences of incarcerated women in Australia found that imprisonment exacerbates pre-existing problems in women's lives such as poverty, substance abuse, traumatic experiences and psychological problems. There is not much information on how women can be supported to maximise their well-being during pregnancy, childbirth and postpartum. It is felt that the existing studies are not sufficiently rigorously evaluated (Bard et al, 2016; Wilson et al, 2022) and that they only sporadically consider the experiences of women serving a prison sentence (Sapkota et al, 2022). It is also assumed that mothers' problems may be reflected in the fulfilment of their children's needs. At the moment of imprisonment, the mother is displaced from some established routines and experiences stress due to separation from the child. Even the mothers who remain in prison with their children point out that they are under pressure due to the constant monitoring of their child-rearing, although a number of women also state that they feel safer in prison because they have a roof over their heads and regular meals. It is undeniable that women also suffer specific deprivations related to the loss of the traditional role of wife and housewife, which makes their position very different from that of men (Špadijer-Džinić et al, 2009). Some studies pointed out the difficulties mothers face after their release from prison when they have to secure a home and take care of their children after being freed from the struggle for survival for a while. Mothers are reluctant to approach the authorities for help in the post-prison period because they do not want to be stigmatised and draw attention to themselves and their children. Women in Australia have also had problems in the area of social housing because they have not been treated as a privileged group and have had difficulty exercising other rights in the area of social care due to their unfavourable educational level and lack of knowledge (Breuer et al, 2021).

It is undeniable that a prison sentence can have a negative impact on the fulfilment of material needs, as the imprisoned parent does not earn money and may incur additional costs due to visits, preparing packages for inmates and paying for legal services. Therefore, it is not surprising that children whose parents are not materially disadvantaged are better off and that the risks are particularly high for children living in underprivileged environments (Turney & Goodsell, 2018: 153). Difficulties concerning money also relate to loss of residence. For example, up to a third of mothers in the United Kingdom (UK) have been found to be homeless after serving a prison sentence, making it impossible for them to continue caring for their children after release from prison. At the same time, as they are no longer the children's guardians, they have no special status when applying for social housing (UNODC, 2014: 21).

However, the consequences of parental imprisonment might not be only negative. When it comes to families where partner violence and child abuse manifest themselves, and also families where the parent-child relationship is somewhat damaged, the child may enjoy certain benefits from the parent's absence. This is especially true for children of parents who lead chaotic lives and of addicted parents, so that the child is given the opportunity to lead a stable and peaceful life once the parent leaves home. Certain studies even indicate that prisoners themselves notice positive changes in the behaviour of their children from whom they are separated (Jones & Wainaina-Woźna, 2013), which could be related to the fact that the child is no longer exposed to dangerous situations and is also no longer under the supervision of parents who do not have sufficient parenting skills. Research obtained in this

way suggests that the children of prisoners had satisfactory mental health (Venema et al., 2022: 493) or minimal mental health problems, although this may also indicate a particular development of resilience due to the effect of various protective factors. If the parent was not present in the child's upbringing even before imprisonment, then their imprisonment has no significant impact (Robertson, 2007: 10).

Furthermore, the impact of imprisonment differs depending on whether the children are younger or older, boys or girls, and whether the sentences are shorter or longer. It should also be borne in mind that in modern times, the perspective from which the concept of resilience is viewed is changing significantly, so that resilience is no longer interpreted as a set of personal characteristics and skills, but as a complex process and functioning of the system (Bukvić & Popović-Ćitić, 2023).

The negative consequences of parental imprisonment have been found to be more pronounced in boys, as well as in children who lived with an incarcerated parent prior to imprisonment (Turney & Goodsell, 2018: 153). A New Zealand study found that women who were incarcerated for longer periods of time had weaker relationships with their children and that the quality and intensity of relationships declined over time, with technical complications in maintaining communication also contributing (Robertson, 2007: 21). Whether the parent-child attachment is maintained certainly depends on the type of prison in question and how difficult it is to organise visits, but also on how close parents and child actually were at the time of separation (Stack, 2020: 150). It is therefore quite understandable that children who are not close to their parents are emotionally burdened by keeping in contact, while visits have a positive effect on children who are closely bonded to their parents (Stack, 2020: 152).

Parenting in and out of prison - possibilities in practice, state of affairs in Serbia

As far as the children of prisoners in Serbia are concerned, it can be said without a doubt that there are no defined mechanisms for the care and protection of these children. From the Strategy for the Development of the System of Execution of Criminal Sanctions 2022-2027¹, we learn that 7,230 persons were serving prison sentences in 2021, while the total number of persons deprived of liberty, taking into account custodial measures, security measures, juvenile and misdemeanour sentences, amounted to 10,557. The proportion of women in the total population of persons deprived of their liberty was 4,3%. The Strategy provides for certain measures to improve the treatment of particularly vulnerable groups of offenders, including women. However, it is noticeable that not much attention has been paid to aspects related to parenthood, so that there are not even estimates of how many offenders have underage children at the time of serving their sentence. In this context, the research conducted in 2021 by the Centre for Social Work in Leskovac (abbreviated: CSW) focused on the services provided to children of imprisoned parents in the period from 2015 to 2021 (Đorđević & Hrnčić, 2023). Since the children of convicted persons do not constitute a special category of social protection services users, 20 families whose members were parents sentenced to imprisonment were identified on the basis of the case manager's

¹ Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 142/22

recollection, and contact was made with 7 families, from which 9 children aged 4 to 22 years were chosen to participate in the study. In addition, 16 employees of the Service for the protection of children and adolescents in the CSW were interviewed. The results of the study indicate that the children were generally not informed in detail about the reasons for their parents' absence, but that they had the opportunity to visit their parents in prison, which the children were mostly happy to do. The children were not prepared in any way before the visit to the prison took place, and the arrangement of the visit itself depended mainly on the decision of the parent or guardian who was living with the child at the time. The children felt sad and insecure, and even after the visits there was a feeling of anxiety. A number of children manifested psychological problems and problems in coping with the school curriculum. The prison and the CSW did not apply a specific procedure in order to assess the child's well-being in the context of maintaining relations with the absent parent (Đorđević & Hrnčić, 2023: 378-381). The CSW provided financial support and other services to children and families, in the same manner that these services are provided to all other social services users. Specific training for case managers on the needs of children of prisoners was not provided, although professionals felt that they had the necessary knowledge and means to meet the needs of these children (Đorđević & Hrnčić, 2023).

Truth be told, even in Europe, the care for children whose parents are serving a prison sentence has not been systematically organised or standardised, although countries such as Sweden and Norway have been considering ways to protect this vulnerable group for several decades through coordinated measures of justice and social services systems. It should be noted that the European Commission's Recommendation was recently adopted, calling on Member States to place prisoners in facilities as close as possible to their place of residence and to allow family visits in child-friendly conditions (EU, 2022).

Legal framework

International legal documents define both the rights of the child and the rights of the parents in family matters, whereby it is undisputed that these rights are acquired at birth and are inviolable, so that incarceration of a parent must not override them.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) applies to all areas of a child's life as well as to a child in special circumstances, which certainly includes a child who is separated from his or her parents due to imprisonment. There is no doubt that the best interests of the child presuppose the preservation and maintenance of family relationships, which is why Article 8 of the Convention regulates the obligation of the state to respect the child's right to family relationships without unlawful interference. Also, Article 9, paragraph 3 of the Convention states that authorities shall respect the right of a child separated from one or both parents to maintain regular personal relationships and direct contact with both parents, unless this is contrary to the best interests of the child. All children, including those whose parents are in prison, have the right to adequate housing, health care, a decent standard of living and education (Articles 24-28). In decisions that may affect the child, the assessment of the best interests of the child should be paramount and particularly binding on the competent state authorities (Article 3). States should also create the conditions for a child who is capable of forming his or her own views to be able to express them, taking due

account of the child's views in accordance with his or her age and maturity (Article 12). Although it is generally recognized that there is no universal definition of the term 'best interests', it is undisputed that it includes ensuring safety, emotional well-being and appropriate conditions for growth and development.

The UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Mandela Rules), adopted in 1955 and revised in 2015, stipulate that prisoners must be able to communicate regularly with their families by writing letters, using available means of telecommunication and receiving visits (Rule No. 58). Where conjugal visits are possible, this right should be available to both men and women without discrimination, while ensuring safety and dignity in the available facilities.

United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules, 2010) are of particular relevance for women serving prison sentence, bearing in mind that these rules build on the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners and focus on the specific needs of women, which have traditionally been neglected in the field of execution of criminal sanctions (Kovačević, 2012). The adoption of this document establishes a special obligation for authorities and courts to consider the special needs and welfare of their children when sanctioning women (UNODC, 2014). Thus, the preamble of this document underlines that efforts should be made to avoid deprivation of liberty during criminal proceedings in the case of pregnant women and single mothers, while the imposition of prison sentences should only be used in exceptional cases and only for the most serious offences. Rule No. 2 stipulates that, upon admission to prison, the necessary measures should be taken to enable the care of the children of female prisoners, with particular regard to the best interests of the child. Furthermore, Rule No. 4 states that in the placement and transfer from one institution to another, special consideration must be given to the distance of the institution from the place of residence of the prisoners' children, the wishes of the prisoners, the means of support and the unimpeded maintenance of relations with the children. Regulation No. 12 stipulates the obligation to provide gender-specific and appropriate care for the mental health of a convicted woman, with special consideration given to previous trauma and life experiences. As regards contact with the outside world, Rule No. 26 provides that all necessary measures should be taken to maintain family contact, including facilitating visits from family members living in distant places. Rule No. 28 states that visits of children must take place in appropriate premises, with an appropriate staffing that allows direct contact between mother and child, and authorities should encourage the arrangement of longer visits. Activities in prisons should be designed to allow pregnant women and women caring for children to participate fully, which may include organised child-care within the facility. The implementation of measures such as rehabilitation and probation is strongly recommended in order to promote the establishment and maintenance of relationships with family members and reintegration with appropriate support (Rule No. 45). Rules 48 to 52 refer to special categories of prisoners, namely pregnant women, nursing mothers and women in prison with children. In short, the health and nutritional needs of pregnant and breastfeeding women must be taken into account and the prison should have appropriate conditions for the stay of mothers with children. Authorities are obliged to organise the conditions for bringing up children in such a way that children in prison enjoy conditions

similar to those on the outside, with the decision as to when the child leaves the institution being made with the best interests of the child in mind. The child can only leave the institution when appropriate care is provided. Even after the child has left the institution, all measures should be taken to ensure that the child maintains as good and frequent a relationship as possible with the mother, unless this is contrary to the child's best interests. Finally, Rule No. 63 provides that the decision on conditional or early release shall take into account the parental role of the prisoner and that she shall receive special support during the reintegration period.

Good practice and parenting in prison

The literature suggests that the negative impact of parental incarceration on the child's welfare can be prevented or reduced, to some point, through planning that accommodates the needs of the child and the mother, and through various types of counselling and education (Robertson, 2007).

The best interests of the child should be focused on through all the stages of the criminal justice process and the initial deprivation of liberty, when it is particularly important that the encounter with the police must not be traumatic. It is vital that the parent caring for the child is informed about available resources for support within the first official contact with the police and the justice system. During the criminal proceedings, the interests of the children must not be neglected, so that they are also one of the circumstances that influence the choice and assessment of the sentence. In this sense, expert services and anamnesis provided by the social welfare system are of great significance. It is recommended to design appropriate protocols and print manuals for professionals and lay persons (UNODC, 2014).

Maintaining contact and closeness is in the interests of both the child and the parent, and the parent will be able to cope better with the challenges of prison if he/she feels good about his relationship with his/her child (Robertson, 2007: 21). In the context of all the above, living with a child in prison can be a suitable solution, especially in the cases of babies and young children. Thus, almost anywhere in the world it is possible for a child to be placed in a penal institution, with the maximum age of a child living in prison being defined differently, so that in general children can stay in prison until the age of one, up to three. We should not lose sight of the complaints that being in prison prevents the child from enjoying the rights that other children do get to fulfil. Therefore, it is necessary to assess when the benefits of living in prison outweigh the negative effects that the prison environment brings. It is undeniable that living in prison prevents the child from socialising with children and the community outside the prison and that the mother is not able to fully dedicate herself to the role of parent (UNODC, 2014). The literature points out that by being in the institution, the child enjoys the right to be cared for by the biological parent and that creating a strong bond between mother and child at an early age has far-reaching effects on the child's wellbeing (Covington, 2016: 116). It is certainly also advisable to opt for a sanction that does not imply incarceration or to replace the institutional sanction with an alternative one, which should come to the fore especially in case of single mothers. It should be borne in mind that in many countries, including Serbia, there are no multiple penal institutions for women, but

only one or a few facilities, which inevitably means that the mother is far away from the child's place of residence.

If the incarceration of the mother is nevertheless unavoidable, the maintenance of the bond and relationship with the parent in prison should be encouraged. This is based on the premise that the right to contact and visits is the right of the child, and not the privilege of the mother. Research has shown that maintaining relationships in most cases has a positive and decisive influence on the stability and proper development of children. Direct contact is particularly important in this respect, although indirect communication is also useful. Research shows that children who maintain contact have better coping skills (Jones & Wainaina-Woźna, 2013). For contact between the child and the mother to truly fulfil its purpose, it may be necessary to teach parents how to communicate and build a relationship of trust and closeness with the child. For this reason, 'remote parenting' courses are organised in countries such as China and Kenya, where inmates get to learn about the needs of children of a certain age, their cognitive abilities and how to communicate with children in an exemplary manner (UNODC, 2014: 76).

In terms of maintaining the relationship between mother and child, it is important that the procedures for organising visits are not complicated. For example, searches and other security checks should be carried out in an appropriate manner, bearing in mind that children will become fully accustomed to them over time. Also, the first visit to prison should not be unnecessarily delayed, as the child will feel stress and uncertainty until they are sure that their parent is safe (Jones & Wainaina-Woźna, 2013: 558). It is therefore advisable to conduct the visit in the first week after the deprivation of liberty.

During the first visit, a detailed prison tour and familiarisation with the prison regime should be organised. The first visit should also be an opportunity to liaise with resources for help, rather than waiting for problems to arise in the field of family relationships. In this context, it should be noted that research shows that children's resilience is higher when quality relationships with grandparents and siblings are maintained (Jones & Wainaina-Woźna, 2013). This is why interventions to support the maintenance of healthy family relationships are so important. This can be of great importance for the re-entry period, as it is more difficult for a mother who has been rejected by other family members to reintegrate and take on the role of a parent.

Facilitating longer and meaningful visits, as well as various interesting activities carried out directly with the parent, helps to maintain a quality relationship between mother and child. In this sense, it is desirable to involve the child and parents through board games and craft activities. Entertainment is particularly important for younger children who are not able to engage in prolonged conversations with their parents, so static activities in rooms with a gloomy atmosphere do not suit them. To implement these and similar measures, it is necessary to train prison staff on family-centred policies and children's rights (Irish Penal Reform Trust, 2023). Civil society organisations can also be involved in the education process. For example, the non-governmental organisation RODA in Croatia has produced a brochure for prison staff and distributed it to all prisons explaining how to recognise the needs of children visiting a parent in prison (Irish Penal Reform Trust, 2023).

Apart from the fact that there should be no rigid rules when visiting parents in prison, it is also important that the children have the financial means to get to the penal institutions. These issues have not been systematically addressed, so in most countries financial support for the purchase of transport tickets and fuel is only provided by certain non-governmental agencies. Penal Reform International, for example, reports that it has provided funding to enable family members in Uganda to visit their relatives in prisons up to 900 km away, whom they had previously been unable to see for up to five years (Penal Reform International, 2023). It is clear that covering travel costs is unattainable for many countries for the time being. Therefore, one should think about making phone calls for convicts free of charge, or at least not expensive. Mother should be allowed to make phone calls at least a few times a week. It should be mentioned that in European countries such as Spain and France, making phone calls from prison is so expensive that many prisoners cannot afford regular contact with their family members. For example, daily phone calls in France cost between 70 and 110 EUR per month, with 22% of prisoners having less than 50 EUR per month (Penal Reform International, 2023).

The use of modern technology, particularly video calls, can contribute to maintaining closer contact between children and their mothers in prison. It is interesting to note that the Covid 19 pandemic led to the widespread use of video calls due to the ban on visits and that technological means continue to be used even after the end of the ban (Irish Penal Reform Trust, 2023). There are also programmes to improve literacy in the USA, where mothers can read and record fairy tales and other appropriate reading materials, which are then sent to their children using various technological means (Hoffmann et al., 2010). The above shows that even without large investments in material resources, the state of the rights of vulnerable groups can be improved.

It is desirable to organise workshops and training for incarcerated parents to develop and improve parenting skills. It is undeniable that a significant number of incarcerated parents lack parenting skills, which may be due to their previous life experiences as well as the fact that they themselves have not experienced positive parenting in their own childhood (Norman et al., 2022). In this sense, it should be borne in mind that the prison system is increasingly taking into account the prisoner's parental role and the child's right to have their needs met, as well as security aspects of prison operations and programmes aimed directly at prisoners. It is therefore necessary to identify additional resources, but also to raise awareness among prison administrators so that the implementation of interventions and programmes to improve parenting can take place. Research shows that even initiatives that focus only on incarcerated parents, without structured involvement of children, have some positive effects and that prisoners emphasised that after such programmes they have improved their relationships with their children, that they have acquired new skills and that they are more willing to participate in disciplining the children (Hoffmann et al, 2010, 400). One of the best-known parenting initiatives in the US is Girl Scouts Beyond Bars (GSBB) for incarcerated mothers and their daughters. Part of the GSBB activities involve mothers who are in prison preparing for a visit and planning activities that they will do with their daughters, while on the outside girls are meeting and socialising with peers who have had similar experiences. The results of the programme were rated as very good, as

communication with the mothers improved and the girls achieved better academic results (Hoffmann, 2010, 400).

Additional commitment from the authorities in the area of post-penal care is required. It is undeniable that, with the exception of some Scandinavian countries, there is no adequate coordination between the justice, health and social care systems and that available resources are extremely scarce and difficult to access. Therefore, in Ireland, it is recommended that the Child Welfare Service, known as TUSLA, in collaboration with other services, take additional measures to reach out to children of imprisoned parents in cooperation with civil society and offer them individualised support measures (Irish Penal Reform Trust, 2023).

The role of the school in meeting the needs of students whose parents are in prison has also been recognised. For example, the non-governmental agency Families Outside in Scotland, in partnership with the state, organised training for teachers going into prison, where they were to be made familiar with the experience a child goes through when visiting a relative or parent in prison. Certain teaching materials were also distributed to schools. Teachers have engaged in this practice and emphasised that they did not know what approach to take when working with students affected by imprisonment, as incarceration is considered a taboo subject (Haines, 2017). Given the complexity of the situation, the child's needs are unlikely to be met in school, but it is important to build a trusting and non-judgmental relationship so that the child and parents feel free to ask for help in the school, which can refer them to other available resources for support. Otherwise, the literature indicates that strengthening the sense of belonging to the school can contribute to positive development and the prevention of behavioural problems (Stojanović & Popović-Ćitić, 2022). Furthermore, research suggests that teachers may have lower expectations for the academic performance of children of incarcerated parents, which can have a negative impact on children's success, so in this sense, some sort of education for teachers is also needed (Dallaire et al., 2010: 285).

It is extremely important to inform the public about the needs and problems of children of imprisoned parents. The Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE) points out that the media play an indispensable role in reducing the stigmatisation and rejection of children and can strongly support the development of resources that meet the needs of this group. Therefore, it is important to follow ethical guidelines when reporting on children of incarcerated parents in order to emphasise not only the negative impact of their status, but also their unlimited potential for personal development. It is desirable to show the children's perspective and the challenges that children face due to the fact that they are forced to go to correctional institutions, while sensationalism and stereotypical portrayals of prisons and prisoners should be avoided (Fleischner, 2019).

Conclusion

The multiple increase in the female prison population, as a global trend since the beginning of the 21st century, highlights the problems and unmet needs of their children left behind. Apart from being in direct contradiction to international standards, the principle of humanity and the state's obligation to care for the youngest, neglecting the needs of this vulnerable group can cause or exacerbate various disorders of mental, emotional and social

functioning and also contribute to the intergenerational transmission of criminality. It is not unknown that children of incarcerated mothers belong to disadvantaged social groups even before they are physically separated from their parents, so incarceration only exacerbates the situation.

A responsible and strategic approach to the children of imprisoned mothers requires that they are first recognised as a group of children that deserves special protection. It is therefore necessary to identify the number of these children and to define their status within the judicial and penitentiary system, and within the system of social protection. Some changes should be made at the level of the normative framework.

Furthermore, an additional orientation of penal institutions towards the specific parental needs of mothers is necessary so that the security barriers in prison do not constitute an insurmountable obstacle between the child and the mother.

We should not lose sight of the fact that everyone, including prisoners, has the right and the duty to enjoy parenthood. So, in addition to measures aimed directly at children and female prisoners, the public must be educated about life in prison and families separated by imprisonment, in order to reduce the stigmatisation and prejudices that exacerbate the already complicated situation of children and incarcerated mothers.

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