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Women Providing and Men Free Riding: Work, Visits and Gender Roles in Mexican Prisons

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ABSTRACT

Facing the Covid-19 pandemic, prisons in Mexico City prohibited visits. This sparked clearly gendered protests: male prison inmates complained that the restrictions left them without resources to deal with prison shortages, while women complained that it prevented them from sending resources to their families. Based on data from life story interviews conducted before the pandemic, we explore visits, prison work, and gendered child-rearing practices in Mexican prisons. We argue that incarcerated mothers adopt a provider role in prison, in contrast to incarcerated fathers, who abandon this traditionally masculine fatherhood role. Suspension of visits thus have distinctly gendered consequences.

KEYWORDS

Covid-19; Pandemic; Alternatives to incarceration; Early release mechanisms; Prison reform; Mexico; prison; children; gender; prison work

Introduction

On February 27, 2020, the first person infected with Covid-19 was reported in Mexico City. The man, who had traveled from Italy, was admitted to the City's National Institute of Respiratory Diseases (INER).¹ Three weeks later, on March 20, 2020, quarantine began with the official suspension of school activities.² One month later there were already 131 confirmed cases and 4 deaths. At the start of the pandemic, the criminal justice system implemented a 4-phase protocol for prisons: prevention, early case identification and isolation, identification of disease severity, and evacuation.³ Within a few days, 20 suspected Covid-cases were detected in prisons, leading to the implementation of stricter measures. Among these, and most importantly, was the suspension of family visits.⁴ With an average of 10,000 daily visits to state prisons (including suppliers, lawyers, family members, etc.), this was a significant interruption of prison life. It also raised concerns for unrest as in 2009, when visits were suspended during the AH1N1 influenza epidemic, riots had broken out in 5 prisons.

Indeed, to date, there have been a series of protests over the suspension of visits in Mexican prisons, with significant differences between the complaints emanating from the male prison inmates and the female ones. The suspension of visits affected both populations, but in men's prisons, inmates complained that they had lost access to resources supplied during visits, while women protested that the lack of visits meant that they had no way of providing their families (and especially children) with the resources they were able to

generate in prison. We will argue, and demonstrate, that these differences in protest motivations reveal highly gendered child-caring and child-rearing practices, as well as important gendered differences in prison work and prisoner roles in Mexico.

Historically, women prisoners have received less attention in criminological studies than men (Greer, 2000; Pollock, 2002). In recent years, however, a growing body of literature has compared the adjustment of incarcerated men and women (Jiang & Winfree, 2006, p. 33). In this paper, we use literature on gendered prisonization processes to understand work, visits, and child-rearing practices within Mexican prisons. We explain the difference in the objections to the Covid-19 measures with the help of life story interviews conducted before the outbreak of the pandemic. We suggest that women with children adopt a traditionally masculine provider role in prison, by sending money to their families and children, while in contrast, male prisoners abandon this conventional provider role and receive money and other goods from their families.

Mexican prisons, Covid-19 and visits

On April 11, prison authorities in Mexico confirmed the first six cases of Covid-19 in the country's prisons: five in the Penitentiary and Social Reintegration Center of Cuautitlán (State of Mexico), and one in the Center for Social Reintegration in Mérida (Yucatán). The outbreak in the Cuautitlán prison was particularly concerning, as it is one of the most overcrowded prisons in the country.

On April 22, Congress approved an amnesty law⁵ for those sentenced or prosecuted, at the federal level, for the crimes of abortion, homicide due to kinship, crimes against health, simple robbery, sedition, and finally for any crime committed by indigenous people who were sentenced without the presence of interpreters or defense attorneys with knowledge of their language or culture. Although the amnesty aimed to relieve pressure on the penitentiaries, in reality, it was relatively ineffectual as it only applied to 7% of the total population of 43,255 inmates in federal prisons, which also only have 52.47% occupancy (Censo Nacional de Gobierno, Seguridad Pública y Sistema Penitenciario Estatales [CNGSPSPE], 2019). Although, on average, state prisons are not overcrowded (with 93.57% occupancy – capacity of 216,237 and 202,337 prisoners), 110 of the 297 prisons do show levels of overcrowding, reaching a peak of 472% in Chalco and 433% in Lerma (both in the State of Mexico). There was no amnesty at the state level, although some states accelerated the release of prisoners who were in the last stages of their sentences. For example, in Mexico City, the Judicial Power released 78 prisoners on humanitarian grounds in April,⁶ and another 250 prisoners⁷ were released by May.

In March, another measure was taken with the publication of the Action Protocol for the Care of Covid-19⁸ in federal centers. States later published their own protocols that included basic recommendations such as implementing information campaigns, reinforcing sanitary measures, having an isolation area for possible cases, tightening health surveillance to detect cases, and considering restrictions on family visits. A third preventative measure was the restriction on or suspension of visits to social reintegration centers. At the federal level, the visiting system was not modified, but the vast majority of States adopted some type of measure, which included: a) restricting the number/days of visits (respecting social distancing); b) restricting contact (although visitors could leave food or objects for their relatives); or c) total suspension of visits. The latter was applied in April to

the highest risk prisons, such as the Cuautitlán prison (State of Mexico),⁹ where 23 inmates were found to have coronavirus symptoms. Four of these cases were later confirmed and 19 inmates were transferred to Neza Norte suspected of being infected, which had been set up as a hospital to serve prisoners with Covid-19. The suspension of visits was later extended to other prisons and states, such as Guanajuato and Veracruz.¹⁰

In this study we are particularly interested in the consequences of the restrictions on visits for the prison population. There are different types of visits: family, intimate, family inter-prison units and visits from children in the charge of some welfare institution. It is calculated that on average, 3,500 people per day pass through federal prisons, a number that increases on holidays (Protocolo de actuación para la atención de Covid-19 al interior de Centros Federales de Reinserción Social [PAACEFERESOS], 2020). Suspension of visits is not a trivial measure as visits are not only prisoners' emotional connection with their loved ones, but also a source of economic and material resources. Visitors in Mexico bring a range of items to the prisons: food, water, clothing, hygiene items, materials for making crafts, money, and so on. This is particularly important given the serious deficiencies in the provision of basic commodities in Mexican prisons. According to *Diagnóstico Nacional de Supervisión Penitenciaria* ("National Diagnostic of Penitentiary Supervision" – DNSP, 2019b) of the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH), state penitentiary centers have: insufficient personnel (72.68%), insufficient work and training activities (66.84%), poor material conditions, insufficient equipment and hygiene in the dormitory areas (62.84%), and a deficiency of health services (32.79%) (DNSP, 2019b).

Some of these deficiencies are covered by families when visiting, and "70% of the inmates depend entirely on supplies and resources provided by their relatives, from personal hygiene items to money to pay other prisoners to guarantee their well-being".¹¹ With the suspension of visits, prisoners lost access to resources and faced a much more expensive and inaccessible black market. For example, shortages and drastic price increases were reported for cleaning products.¹² In many Mexican prisons, inmates are responsible for cleaning their own cells, and for acquiring the necessary equipment to do so. During epidemics, basic hygiene becomes especially important, but also more difficult due to the lack or cost of soap and other cleaning equipment.

The prison population in Mexico is relatively young (32% are between 18 and 29 years of age and 35.3% are between 29 and 39), with basic levels of education (72.1%), economic dependents at the time of arrest (70.3%), or dependent children (64.1%). There are usually more than 5 prisoners per cell (51.1%) and inmates often do not receive even the most basic items from the prison system. For example, only very few report receiving clothing (25%), blankets (21%), footwear (8.9%) and personal hygiene items (7.6%). The prison population therefore depends on work inside the prisons or on visits to obtain these resources (Encuesta Nacional de Población Privada de la Libertad [ENPOL], 2016). The lack of basic commodities during incarceration is generally problematic, but becomes even more critical when visits are suspended, as occurred during the coronavirus pandemic.

The suspension of visits thus significantly impacts the quality of life of prisoners and regularly causes protests by inmates and their families. The National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) designed and implemented the "National Monitoring Mechanism for Covid-19 in Penitentiary Centers"¹³ that detected "the existence of acts and/or events of protest, riots, and other expressions of violence"¹⁴ in the country's prisons. On April 15, the first incident was reported in the Cuautitlán prison (Edomex), with prisoners refusing to

return to their cells after recess in protest against the cancellation of family visits. Outside the prison, a group of family members protested for the same reason, and clashed with approximately 200 riot police.¹⁵ These protests began to spread to other penitentiary centers, such as Barrientos, in Tlalnepantla; Chiconautla in Ecatepec, Neza Bordo in Nezahualcóyotl, Huitzilingo in Chalco, Molino de Flores in Texcoco, Tepachico in Otumba, and Zumpango”.¹⁶

Women, work and children in Mexican prisons

Women represent only 4.6% of the total prison population (ENPOL, 2016). According to prison statistical information (INEGI, 2019, p. 54), prisoners perform the following formal jobs: basic level teachers (599), operators of construction elements, equipment and electrical installations (774), painters, designers, artistic draftsmen, sculptors and set designers (3,706), *maquiladora*¹⁷ workers (10,844), cleaners (17,025), artisans (52,894) and others *maquila*. (22,646). Within this spectrum, women are assigned gendered kitchen tasks, laundry, weaving, sewing, and crafts (Luna et al., 2003). In addition, there are countless informal jobs that prisoners undertake, ranging from washing other prisoners' clothes, bringing water and cooking, to writing love letters for other inmates (Ríos Miranda, 2014).

This context of deprivation and formal or informal jobs is particularly difficult for incarcerated women because most of them are mothers: 89.1% of women in prison have dependent children compared to 62.9% of men (ENPOL, 2016). In most cases they do not have a spouse who shares responsibility for their children. In Mexico, the age limit for minors to remain with their mothers in reclusion is set at three, and women can only have two children living with them at any given time. Men do not have these rights. This is indicative of the highly gendered organizational logic of prisons, which for example, only provides infrastructure for children in women's prisons, and programs of physical exercise (Britton, 1997) or sport (Baumer & Meek, 2018) in men's prisons. The penitentiary system have highly gendered expectations of prisoners and thereby conveys a strong gender message. For men, exercising responsible paternity, including involvement in childcare, thus implies confronting a prison apparatus that reinforces traditional gender roles.

Conditions for children who live with their mothers in prison are precarious: they do not have their own bed (they sleep with their mother), they share cells with other inmates, and they are not provided with food, diapers or clothing. Mothers remain responsible for meeting these needs, in whatever way they can afford. Occasionally charitable organizations help inmates through donations (Diagnóstico Nacional de Supervisión Penitenciaria, 2019a). Because minors are not allowed to remain in the prisons beyond the age of 3, they are subsequently taken care of by relatives. Most of the women who live with children in prison have other children who have been left with female family members, such as grandmothers, aunts, or sisters. In the event that women do not have the support of partners or family to take care of their children, the criminal justice administration chooses an institution that will.

Children in prison represent a great challenge for penitentiary institutions (Palomar, 2007) as there is normally no special budget for child support. Prisons thus need to adjust their budget (when a new minor enters) to cover the extra food service: breakfast, lunch and dinner. However, milk, diapers, blankets, clothing and footwear, as well as hygiene items, remain the responsibility of the incarcerated mothers. Prisons are also not equipped with

reserved areas for pregnant women or single mothers and the children who live with them, nor do they have special staff members to care for or monitor the comprehensive development of the children. The only exclusive space for the care of minors are the Child Development Centers (Cendi), but not all women's prisons have such a center. Furthermore, facilities (classrooms and furniture), teaching resources and staff are insufficient to attend to the 618 minors who live with their mothers in prisons in Mexico City (ENPOL, 2016). There is also a lack of specialized personnel such as pediatric doctors, social workers, psychologists and child psychiatrists.

Gender and imprisonment

According to Zingraff (1980, p. 275) and Kruttschnitt et al. (2000, p. 681), literature on the gendered prisonization process offers two classic models for explaining responses to the deprivations of imprisonment. The functionalist tradition understands the adaptation of behavior to prison as a reaction to the coercion of the penitentiary institution (Sykes, 1958; Wilson, 1968), while the importation tradition focuses on experiences prior to confinement and the subcultures outside of prison to understand prisoners adaptive behavior (Irwin, 1970). Since the 1960s, both models have explained gendered differences in adaptation to prison (for example, Ward & Kassebaum, 1965). These results were later confirmed by other similar studies, such as that of Giallombardo (1966) and Hefferman (1972), and more recently, those of Alarid (1997). In contemporary research these models have been integrated, with the understanding that gender is not a “monolithic experience nor an inflexible identity”. They have also increasingly acknowledged the diversity in men and women's experiences in prison (Kruttschnitt et al., 2000, p. 683). For example, there are many in-prison factors (overcrowding, violence, confinement, length of sentence, etc.) as well as out-prison factors (age, race, economic level, etc.) that influence gendered responses to imprisonment.

Gendered responses to imprisonment can be seen in relation to other inmates and to the family outside of prison (especially children). Men for example, generally tend to “cut loose” from family relationships, while women strive to maintain these ties as best they can (Hart, 1995; Pollock, 2002). Most studies indicate that there is a fundamental gender difference in the way that imprisoned parents relate to their children. Jiang and Winfree (2006, p. 37), state that “incarcerated fathers rarely exhibit concern about their children's fate”, perhaps because they know that the children's mothers or family will take care of them. Women seem to be more aware of the emotional harm caused to their children by their imprisonment, and acknowledge that their imprisonment is a burden on families already struggling with limited resources (Dodge & Pogrebin, 2001). Incarcerated women for example, typically feel frustration and guilt over not being able to take care of their children (Bloom & Chesney-Lind, 2000).

The main concern of many women prisoners is the fate of their children's, reporting that it is “the hardest part of doing time” (Kruttschnitt et al., 2000, p. 711), while men rarely report such feelings (but see Sandberg et al., 2020). Separation from children is painful for men too, but they are usually able to discharge their role as provider to the mother (if she is not imprisoned) or to her family, whereas this is more difficult for women who were single-parents before their incarceration (Datesman & Cales, 1983, p. 142). These gender differences in inmates' relationships with their children are reflected in prison visits. According to

Hairston (1990, p. 26), fathers receive far fewer visits from their children than mothers do. Women get more visits from children and grandmothers, while more “wives and girlfriends” are coming to see the men (Pollock, 2002, p. 111). Arguably, lack of contact with children affects men and women differently, and for imprisoned mothers, the loss of their children is one of the greatest stressors of their life in prison (Harris, 1993, p. 53).

In this study, we explore life story interviews conducted with incarcerated mothers and fathers in Mexican prisons before the coronavirus pandemic, to better understand the impact of the suspension of visits in these penitentiaries. We argue that the restrictions imposed may have affected not only the visits that serve to diminish the “pains of imprisonment” (Sykes, 1958), but also prisoners’ (especially women’s) opportunities for parenting while in prison. The measures taken in Mexican prisons to avoid the spread of Covid-19 highlight some important gender differences and parenting roles between imprisoned mothers and fathers in Mexico. Our study suggests that Covid-19 measures may have very different consequences for women and men in prison, as well as for their families and children.

Materials and method

Data in this study are from life story interviews with incarcerated fathers and mothers in two Mexico City prisons. The interviews formed part of a larger qualitative research project with the overall goal of investigating imprisonment and life-trajectories of Mexican offenders. In total, 24 inmates (12 women and 12 men) were interviewed between January and July of 2019. The interviews were conducted before the pandemic. They inform this study by opening up for understanding the background for the gendered protests to the visits restriction introduced during the Covid-19 crisis. Interviews contextualize what male and female prison inmates may experience in the face of restrictions and explain the gendered challenges of the pandemic for imprisoned parents in Mexican prisons.

Interviews were repeated, on average 3 interviews per inmate, with each session lasting approximately 2 hours. The interviews were conducted in rooms used for workshops, without the presence of guards and at a time chosen by the respondents. A group consisting of a coordinator and an interviewer requested authorization from prison unit directors to interview the prisoners. Participants were contacted through purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990) and selected based on the criteria of being mothers or fathers, but otherwise representing a variety of crimes, convictions and ages. Respondents were explained the objectives of the study, informed consent was obtained and strict confidentiality was maintained. Four of the inmates contacted had no interest in participating.

Participants in this study vary in age, income, and education, but all had children, and all were born in Mexico or were Mexican nationals. They were convicted prisoners and had been in prison for at least one year, for a variety of crimes. The interviews were semi-structured and organized as life story interviews (Atkinson, 1998), covering participants’ lives from childhood to the present. The flexible research design and repeated interviews allowed participants to emphasize the topics most important to them. Family relations was one such topic, particularly their relationship with their own children. We obtained extensive data on parenting roles and practices, from both before and during their time in prison. Another important topic was prison conditions and the work they did while in prison. An interviewer audio recorded the interviews (with participants’ permission) and

then transcribed them. During transcription, we removed identifying information such as their names (the ones provided below are aliases) and the particularities of their crime as well as other identifying information.

Data analysis

Data collected in interviews were analyzed by an interdisciplinary group of researchers. We used thematic analysis and constant comparison to identify primary analytic themes, and transcripts were entered into ATLAS.ti (version 2008) to facilitate data management. The categories were produced in two iterative data coding and analysis processes: first identifying a set of emergent categories, and then developing the final themes for this paper. The categories for the initial coding scheme were inductively drawn from the interviews and then refined through peer discussions of key themes concepts identified in the research literature about for example, life-course criminology and parenting roles in prison. Thus, categories were both data-driven and theoretically informed. In this initial analysis we coded broadly for a variety of categories, such as “care-taker”, “relationship to children before prison”, “relationship to children in prison”, “work in prison”, “violence in prison”, “prison conditions” and others (a total of 16 codes). The initial coding of data was done before the Covid-19 pandemic, and included a wide variety of categories that might be potentially interesting later on in the research process. The second stage of coding took place after Covid-19 and involved rereading and recoding interviews and initial categories for the analysis and argument in this paper; most importantly “visits and deficiencies in Mexican prisons”, “work in prison” and “gendered expectations for parenting while in prison”.

Relationship to children was important in all interviews, more abstractly for men (Sandberg et al., [forthcoming](#)) and in more practical terms for women (Sandberg et al., 2020). Women also tended to speak more extensively about their children. The emphasis on children in the interviews with women probably reflects the importance of motherhood for women, including or maybe especially, for marginalized women (Grundetjern, 2018). It is also possible that this was influenced by gender dynamics in the interviews. Interviews were conducted by a 48-year-old woman with extensive experience in interviewing people at risk (prisoners, street children, victimized women, etc). Relationships with children, and family relations more generally, might have been a “natural” emphasis in these conversations. In all cases, respondents were given the opportunity to express themselves freely on the issues raised in the interviews. Only interpretations were included that the research team coincided on, assuming a certain “truth by agreement” in the analysis. The interviewer also checked the interpretations to ensure that they represented what had been expressed by the respondents and to identify any gaps that needed to be addressed. In some cases, a triangulation with other sources of data was done to either support our interpretations, or to account for alternative explanations.

The study has 24 interviews, and the standard limitations of qualitative methods (e.g., selection bias, random results). The positionality of the interviewer (women in her forties) might have toned down “macho” and “street-wise” identities in interviews, and self-selection to participate might have left out participants with particular experiences or characteristics (but only four rejected to participate). The qualitative study design, was purposive, and has important strengths that were particularly important for this research:

Repeated life story interviews give time for participants to reflect on their life between interviews, for an interviewer to prepare follow-up questions, and for both to get to know each other better than in one-time interviews. Building trust between interviewer and interviewee is pivotal, especially when themes include highly stigmatized practices such as child rearing under difficult circumstances. Prisoners parenting and relationship to family is also complex, with nuances and subtleties that cannot be captured in surveys or through other research designs. Repeated qualitative interviews are therefore especially suitable to explore the different gendered consequences of coronavirus measures in Mexican prisons, especially regarding the possible consequences of the suspension of visits.

Results

In the qualitative analysis below, we analyze gendered parental responses to imprisonment. Particularly the gendered forms of confronting prison deficiencies in Mexico City, in relation to the family (work and visits); the greater restrictions imposed as a result of Covid-19 (prohibition on visits); and the gendered effects of these restrictions. We begin by describing prison deficiencies and the role of visits for the prisoners in this study. We then provide an overview of the types of work available in prison in order to cover these deficiencies. Finally, we turn to our main argument, which is a suggestion that imprisoned men and women spend the income generated from prison work differently, and that visits fulfill different roles for them.

Visits and deficiencies in Mexican prisons

In the overcrowded and under-resourced conditions of state and municipal prisons, restricting visits means much more than losing the sociability of affection and community ties (Fuller, 1993). In Mexico, inmates receive money or objects through visits that are not provided by the prison system. The incarcerated mothers and fathers in this study all said that they did not get their basic needs covered by the prison. Elsa, for example, emphasized that “soap and bleach is the basic thing you should buy here”. Reference was seldom made to luxuries, but rather, to necessities and small things that make life in prison a little easier:

Gabriela: Here if you don't work, you don't die of hunger, but you need more things. They give food, right? But you need sanitary napkins, shampoo, toothpaste, a brush.

Benito: To have my soap, my razor, because I also bathe. Then the food they give here they give you tea, but without sugar, you have to buy your sugar, they give you food, but without salt.

Typically, family members provide toiletries and food, or the money for inmates to buy these products themselves. Inmates in Mexican prisons need either the support from family or prison work to cover their basic needs, as there are many deficiencies.

María: They say it is the most expensive hotel and really it is the most expensive hotel. Everything costs money, even toilet paper, for everything you have to give money. You want to go to court in sneakers, you have to pay for shoelaces. A blanket to avoid being cold costs ten pesos. You want to rent a frying pan; it costs ten pesos. You want to listen to music, you must pay, you want to watch TV you must pay.

Ignacio: It is more expensive to live in prison. I pay here to use the phone, for soda, for the “support” of prison guards (bribes), coffee, bread, all that. I have been spending a minimum of 70, 80 pesos a day.

In Mexican prisons, everything must be paid for, from basic necessities to more luxury goods or bribes, for example, paying the guards to take prisoners to the doctor. However, even with money, it can be difficult, due to the scarcity of basic goods inside prison:

Cristina: About two months ago there was an epidemic of lice and I with my long hair, said “oops, oops, oops”. Then I went out to cry at one of the visitors and I said ‘forgive me, but the truth is that I don’t want to have lice, please “help me”. They brought me a gift and I gave them money. I’m not sorry saying “you know what, I wash your clothes, but give me soap, because I stink like a dead dog”, I don’t feel sorry.

Cristina did not feel the need to apologize for begging for help, since supplies in prison were so limited. This is a commonly used strategy in non-pandemic times. In some cases, when inmates do not have money, they use other means to get what they need. For example, in the absence of financial support from relatives, they may enlist the help of other inmates. But such help comes at a cost, often in an exchange of favors or services in a gift economy (Mauss, 1970), or even from begging. Talking about a companion, Dolores explained how a mother with a child met their needs:

Dolores: Since she entered, she lost contact with her daughter’s father and does not have the support of her family; for this reason, in order to obtain some income, she sells sweets and cigarettes to the visitors, while her daughter asks for money from the relatives of the inmates who come on visiting days.

Women seem to face particular difficulties instead. Not only do they have extra costs, but men appear to get more help from their families. Many men, for example, emphasized that they did not only eat *rancho* (food from the prison service), which was of poor quality, but got their mothers to bring them food in prison.

Daniel: Every Saturday and Sunday, my mom brings me food for the week.

Interviewer: And where do you keep it?

Daniel: In some refrigerators.

Interviewer: And how much is the rent?

Daniel: About 5 pesos, per day.

The incarcerated men admitted that they would not starve with the food provided by the prison, but pointed out that getting extra food supplies increased their health and well-being. Such patterns were not a particular or unique adaptation to prison life (Wilson, 1968), but rather, an importation of gender patterns established prior to imprisonment and reproduced in the deprivation conditions of prison. The men continue to take the role of “children” (of their mothers), despite the fact that they were adults and had their own children (Datesman & Cales, 1983). For example, Antonio, an incarcerated father who had been in prison for 20 years, said: “My mother leaves me food on Sundays and the other days

I eat “rancho”. Such statements highlight the role that mothers play in the lives of their sons in Mexico, a role that seems to be reinforced when men go to prison.

Braulio: Here in jail your wife, your dad, your brothers, your children can leave you, but your mom is never going to leave you. She’s always at the foot of the canyon, always(. . .) At first, she made weekly visits, maybe the first few months, but afterward they faded out a little (. . .) I told my mom when I started working in prison, “look I’m already working, don’t worry, if you want to come every 15–20 days, it’s ok”.

This pattern of mothers looking after their sons in prison, often more than they support their daughters, is deeply rooted in gender inequality and patriarchal cultures. It has severe and problematic consequences for incarcerated women, especially for those with children.

In the meager conditions of Mexican prisons, women also have greater needs than men. In addition to items needed by both (food, clothing, soap), there are a range of women-specific products (sanitary towels, tampons, contraceptives). Furthermore, when mothers live with their children in prison, they must also cover the extra expenses that this entails (diapers, special food, etc.). These gender specific needs generally go unnoticed by the prison system due to the low female prison population. In Mexico City, as elsewhere in Mexico, prisons tend to be organized administratively, according to the needs of men (Azaola & José, 1996; Briseño, 2006; Giacomello, 2013). This is made worse by the patriarchal society outside of prison, and its highly differentiated expectations of men and women concerning children. Following these gendered patterns, prisons authorities expects women to fulfill a specific gender role (to take care of their children) that is not demanded of the men. Prison thus not only reproduce external social conditions of gender, but also reinforce them.

Work in prison

In state prisons, authorities allow some form of work, making it possible for prisoners to make an income while being incarcerated. This is not an opportunity for all prisoners, since it is part of a system of privileges and punishments implemented by the institution (Montoya, 2015, p. 190), but some inmates for example, get irregular jobs in the textile. They are possibly the most privileged and often feel lucky to receive a salary, despite poor working conditions and worker exploitation:

Cristina: I worked making boxes (. . .) and many of them do not pay even the minimum salary.

Interviewer: And how many hours of work?

Cristina: It was from 8 in the morning to 6 in the afternoon, they gave me 80 pesos. They did not pay me daily, they gave it to me at the end of the week, it’s really nothing.

Another form of work approved by the prison authorities allows mothers with children to offer various services on visiting days (four days a week). They assist by carrying bags or offering chairs to visitors, they act as waitresses for which they earn tips, rent blankets for visitors to sit on the floor, and offer products such as sweets, cigarettes or snacks for their companions’ visitors (“basking”). All these represent a welcome opportunity to earn money:

Bety: I work here in the big room, “basking”, carrying the bags to the bedrooms and as a waitress.

Gabriela: Blankets are for everything where there is a wall to sit; obviously who pays for the blanket is the one with the most resources, right? Because they can charge it at 10, at 15 to 30 pesos for one.

The women have to be assigned to “basking” by prison authorities, and women with children are prioritized. This illustrates how the institution expects women with children to assume a provider role, while not expecting the same of the men. Other work is also available to those inmates with the necessary resources. An informal, but accepted, job in prison is trading all kinds of commodities, with the supply often coming from family members during visiting hours:

Verónica: I sell telephone cards, I sell underwear. I have a girl who helps me. So, I have the merchandise on Sunday, I deliver and they pay me. The same Sunday I run out of merchandise.

Xochitl: Yes, I do thank my mother very much, because it was always like that and she brought me ice, juices, water, in winter she brought coffee, tea, hot food, also fruit. She is always seeing what I need, and what I don’t need can be sold here. So, thanks to her I have something to help myself.

By providing commodities that can be sold within the prison, supportive family networks are important for the welfare of inmates. Differences between being in prison and outside (where family networks are also crucial) are therefore less notable in Mexico than in prison systems where inmates can rely on getting their basic needs covered by the prison authorities. However, in some cases, the supply of goods to be sold in prison comes from trading companies, cooperating with inmates and using prison visiting hours to expand their business:

Francisco: Right now, my means of providing for myself is by selling bread and coffee. The days I sell the most are Monday, Tuesday and Saturday, to visitors. In fact, with that sale sometimes I even support myself for the week, because in here, very little sells, here the prices have to be very cheap, for people who have few resources.

Interviewer: And where do you get it from?

Francisco: Outside, there is a trading company, which is the one that monopolizes the distribution of all supplies within the prison. So, you have to do it, from the catalog they teach you, bring me so many pieces of these.

Prisoners can also sell products that are produced in the various workshops. These training workshops reflect a social reintegration ideology, according to which inmates can learn a useful trade for when they obtain their freedom. The workshops are typically gendered, and those offered to women often refer to “styling” (nails, eyelashes, hairdressing), cooking, or making boxes and bags. Dora for example, said that “here we have a chocolate course, though right now I’m learning how to do nails and make stuffed animals”. Again, family networks and visiting hours play an important role. Families can, for example, receive the products made by the inmates and sell them outside of prison:

Irma: In the workshops that they give us here, we're taught how to work with rhinestones, with raffia, nail beauty, I say all that I like, that is to say, I can get it all from here, because I have really worked here and my husband has sold it and with what we have, we have come out ahead, we have sold boats, boxes, bags and thank God everything is sold by us.

Men also attend workshops to generate income within the prison in order to cover the deficiencies of the prison system. (These workshops were also suspended due to the pandemic, exacerbating the men's dependence on their families.) Some of these are similar to those of women, such as workshops where they learn certain crafts and produce goods that they can later sell:

José: There are workshops to learn how to make monkeys with papier mâché, or dolls with soap, make lamps, notebooks, woven or paper handbags.

Interviewer: Where do they sell this?

José: Here during the visits. But very few people come. The ones who buy the most are the lawyers.

While there may be opportunities to produce goods in prison, the market for selling these is generally limited, so it is hardly a lucrative business.

Those prisoners who do not receive money from their relatives or from products sold inside the prison, and who do not have access to more formal jobs or workshops, can offer services to other prisoners who are able to afford them. These services include, for example, cleaning, doing laundry, or cooking:

Gabriela: I have always washed other people's clothes, doing chores, I have washed blankets and I have scrubbed.

Cristina: There are people who want me to wash their clothes or to clean them, they don't give me money, they give me toilet paper, soap, shampoo and with that my basic needs are met.

Hilario: An inmate next to me was about 29, 30 years old, already older than me (...) I was his servant, I was the one who did his things, washed his clothes, his sneakers; he had money (...) I charged the phones. Then he would give me 100, 150, 200, give me shoes, clothes, etc.

These kinds of jobs are considered to be the lowest rung in the hierarchy of prison work, reflecting work hierarchies elsewhere (Duffy, 2007). Being someone's servant, washing their clothes, making their bed and so on, is regarded as lowly work both within and outside prison. Obviously, these types of jobs are more easily accepted by women than men, as, once again, they reproduce external standards of gender.

The incarcerated mothers and fathers in this study work hard to compensate for the lack of basic goods in prison, and sometimes to make money to send to family and children on the outside. They do a variety of work while in prison. They may hold more formal jobs, such as in a textile *maquila*, or have particular positions such as offering services to visitors; participate in a vibrant internal prison market with goods purchased from outside or provided by family members; sell products produced in a wide variety of workshops; or offer services to other prisoners who have more money. This is sometimes an economy based on the use of money, but just as often, it is a complex gift or exchange economy.

Whatever form the market exchanges take, it is crucial for the welfare of the prisoners, and sometimes for that of their families outside of prison as well.

Gendered expectations for parenting while in prison

Both women and men have many expenses while in prison, but as there is a greater social expectation for women to look after their children, their expenses were often higher than those of men. Social expectations of mothering appear to exert such a strong influence on social identity and self-image (Rich, 1986), that regardless of their circumstances, these imprisoned Mexican mothers seem to make every effort to fulfil these expectations and feel guilty if they are unable to (Bloom & Chesney-Lind, 2000). One incarcerated mother, who live with her son in prison, said that she worked hard to:

Gabriela: (...) be able to pay for my and my son's expenses here. I have a visit every six months, but even when they come, they don't bring me anything, right? There are many girls who have visitors bringing them things, but I don't. For my son, the burden of the things I need for him now is lighter, but at the beginning, I had to pay 350 pesos every night for milk and diapers. And besides, I had to pay for water, soap, bleach, toothpaste, toilet paper, sanitary towels, yogurt, porridge, carrots, vegetables, and so on.

In a prison system where inmates' basic needs are not covered, and conditions are generally skewed toward men so that women must also cover the expenses of their children living with them, there is a lot of pressure to find ways to make money. The mothers in this study also talked about the difficulties of providing for their children outside of prison.

Elsa: Three thousand pesos. I save money to send home and the rest to pay what I owed. I gave money to my mom and the rest I kept. Actually, of all that money I just keep 100 pesos for myself.

Semiri: There are girls who obviously have money and they don't get their hands dirty, so I come in there, I get them dirty for them. They pay me for that and I live on that, thank God, it's not a lot of money but at least I have something to give to my mom and my son.

The profits obtained from working in the textile *maquilas*, in workshops, or from selling goods or services in prison often allow women to provide for their family outside the prison, although even so, their families were sometimes still not satisfied (Sandberg et al., 2020, p. 9). Such expectations can be demanding and earning money while imprisoned is not easy. Nevertheless, in general, being able to provide for their children and family was a source of great pride for the incarcerated women. Their effort to cover their children's needs, despite imprisonment, became a source of identity and a way to recover their self-esteem. This attitude allowed them to position themselves with a new strength: despite committing a crime and their imprisonment, they could still be good mothers. (The Covid-19 restrictions have hindered this ability to be "good mothers" from prison).

Gabriela: I was very proud of myself, because my mom came, right, I gave her 500 pesos from the work that I have done here. I said to her: you can have it; you are going to need it after your operation. "Those days when you are not going to be able to work, you are going to need money. I told her: don't worry, I will not run out of food here, don't worry about that. You

have taken care of my daughters, you have been with me, and I earned this money with the sweat of my brow”.

From the interviews in this study, it appears that imprisoned Mexican women are expected to continuously support their children, both outside and inside prison. Men, on the other hand, seem to leave the responsibility of their children’s care to mothers and families outside of prison. This was illustrated in the Covid –19 protests. While men were unhappy about their loss of access to resources, women complained that they were unable to help their children.

The incarcerated fathers often asked their families for help in taking care of their children in addition to the support for themselves. For example, one father of five, relied entirely on his family’s support:

Daniel: The first thing that helped me a lot was the support of my family. My parents, my brothers, all are those who have been aware of my children, what they lack, what they need, because it is not easy to give them money, there are very, very low wages here.

Another father, who had been in prison for 11 years, admitted to never having worked while inside. He was supported by his family (mother and sister), while his wife provided for his children:

Hector: My family helps me, they bring me my things, everything they can to help. My mom is already 80 years old or older and comes to visit me and brings me my things

Interviewer: Have you never done a job that paid for it?

Hector: No

Interviewer: Didn’t you have that need?

Hector: No, thank God no, my sisters are professionals. I have a sister who is single and she is the strong one, she is the one who contributes almost everything, my mom helps me. My wife works for the children, I cannot demand more of her.

He had never considered working to support his children, like most of the mothers do (Jiang & Winfree, 2006). There seems to be less pride and self-esteem associated with being a provider for men than for women, and it did not seem to be an important source of identity. Instead, the fathers highlighted the emotional connection to their children (Sandberg et al., [forthcoming](#)). In fact, rather than taking on their economic responsibilities as fathers, it appears relatively easy for the men to assume the role of victims that are in need of help from their families. (The Covid-19 measures have impacted the opportunities prisoners families have to provide such care).

Another inmate, Augusto, said that the mother of his children and some neighbors came to visit him weekly, and he benefited from what they brought him: “So they are the ones who see me and bring me food, money, cards, I need nothing”. Augusto even accepts support from the mother of his children, who also took care of them.

Most men count on family and relatives to provide for their children while they are in prison. The men’s stories of work in prison mainly emphasize their concern for paying their own expenses. One father for example, when asked about the work he did in prison, assumed that the money he made would go toward his own expenses:

Interviewer: And who covers your expenses or how do you cover them?

Braulio: Well, selling crafts, sweets.

Interviewer: What crafts do you work on?

Braulio: Paintings, embossments.

Interviewer: And where do you sell them?

Braulio: Well, to visitors or family or acquaintances. So, that's how I pay my expenses.

In contrast with almost all the mothers, only three of the fathers in this study spoke about wanting to provide for their children from prison, and only two actually contributed, sporadically, to their children's expenses.

Juan: At the beginning when Laura was born and then José came, I tried to give them as much as I could, and I always bought them shoes, things, so that they did not have to look for it on the street. I said "what can I give my family, money to eat, walking shoes, clothes". I can't buy it here, but I try to support them with something.

Mario: I have been able to buy shoes for my daughter, I already bought a lamp for my son too. I mean, I also gave him money for his sneakers. Now it's only small expenses, but in prison, it is difficult to get (. . .) Before I used to spend the money on myself, that is, how much or how little I earned always focused on me and me. But not now, I have passed on from that, if my children enjoy it, it gives me a satisfaction, a totally different one from the one I had when I spent everything on myself.

These were the exception however, as generally, the men seemed less concerned with providing for their children than the women inmates. The men appeared to be able to rely on more support and help from family members than the women could. The women, in contrast, were expected to continue supporting their children even during their imprisonment, and the pandemic highlights how the institution makes no attempt to break these gender stereotypes. While the men in this study seemed to expect to support their children outside prison, in accordance with the traditional role of men as providers (Marks & Palkovitz, 2004), such expectations appear to be put on hold while they are in prison.

Discussion

Our data indicate the same gendered response in relation to the family outside of prison, and especially to children, as the literature on gendered prisonization indicates: When imprisoned, men break or put family relationships on hold, while women do their best to maintain these (Hart, 1995; Pollock, 2002). We further this research, by arguing that women prisoners, at least in this study from a Mexico City, prison seem to adopt a provider role for their children. This is made possible by the extensive formal and informal jobs available in many of these prisons. In addition to working to cover their own needs, which are not provided by the criminal justice authorities, they send money to their relatives to cover the costs of raising their children. Although our results are only explorative, and further and more systematic research is necessary, the opposite seems to be the case for men. Most of

the men in this study work in prisons to fund their own needs, and if they struggle to cover these needs, they can often rely on help from their families. This gendered pattern is mirrored in the protests following the coronavirus measures in Mexican prisons: men complained of being cut off from access to goods brought to them by visitors, while women complained that the measure prevented them from sending resources to their families. In this way, the coronavirus crisis simply exacerbated prior differences in roles assumed by men and women regarding the care of children in prison.

Following the importation model on the processes of gendered prisonization, experiences prior to confinement are pivotal to understanding what happens while in prison (Irwin, 1970). The Mexican context for example, is crucial for understanding family dynamics: it is a society based on familism and Marianism identities, which essentially mean placing the family ahead of individual interests (Ingoldsby, 1991; Ruiz & Ransford, 2012). However, gender inequality serves to reinforce and uphold traditional gender norms and expectations, leaving women vulnerable in a gendered hierarchy of familism. Thus, in extreme situations such as incarceration, it tends to be women who assume full responsibility for their children. Prison reproduces these differentiated conceptions of gender, and these have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis. As seen above, the prison infrastructure and administrative apparatus tend to orient organizational structures in such a way that they preserve traditional gender roles (sport, maternity, etc). For marginalized Mexican women, raising a child is an interchangeable responsibility between women of the extended family, which continues even during incarceration (Sandberg et al., 2020). Men, on the other hand, seem to be able to disregard their financial responsibility when incarcerated, and instead hang on to their fatherhood through stories of their dreams to be emotionally supportive and caring fathers, especially after their release (Sandberg et al., *forthcoming*).

Prison visits in Mexico entail the exchange of goods, money and access to basic supplies. Importantly, and as opposed to prisons in many other countries, the flow does not only go in one direction: it is an economy, formal, informal and illegal, from which prisoners' families and children can also benefit. Visits form part of a complex apparatus for the circulation of goods and services, and provide a veritable market. These are not markets governed by formal rules and regulations, but rather, complex networks of exchanges that resemble the laws that govern informal commerce, exchange- and gift economies. Prison visits thus reveal the "porous" nature of prison walls, and the agency and creativity that emerge in order to meet the basic needs of both prisoners and their families outside.

This crucial system of exchange has been temporarily stopped following the implementation of coronavirus pandemic measures. Suspensions of visits come with a huge cost for prisoners and their families, with devastating effects on the gendered informal economy. Rather than breaking the circle of familism, they reinforce connections based on traditional conceptions of gender. In countries such as Mexico, with an under-funded prison system, and large informal and formal economies in prison, banning visits not only carries emotional costs (Carlson & Cervera, 1991), but also some highly practical ones. Although justified by the pandemic, the ban on visits has further worsened the welfare and quality of life of prisoners dependent on support to cover their basic needs. It also creates great difficulties for families and children who depend on the economic support generated by work in prison. The gender patterns highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic, points to fundamental societal and prison problems in Mexico, and possibly elsewhere in Latin

America. They also reveal the vulnerabilities and risks of a penitentiary system that relies on prison visits to feed the internal and external prison economies.

Notes

1. <https://www.forbes.com.mx/confirman-el-primer-caso-de-coronavirus-covid-19-en-mexico/>.
2. <https://www.marca.com/claro-mx/trending/2020/03/31/5e82a827268e3e515c8b45b0.html>.
3. <https://www.eleconomista.com.mx/politica/Presentan-protocolo-de-actuacion-para-centros-penitenciarios-de-la-CDMX-por-Covid-19-20200318-0073.html>.
4. <https://www.jornada.com.mx/2020/03/19/capital/028n3cap>.
5. https://www.dof.gob.mx/nota_detalle.php?codigo=5592105&fecha=22/04/2020.
6. <https://www.elfinanciero.com.mx/cdmx/liberan-a-78-reos-para-reducir-riesgo-de-contagios-por-coronavirus-en-prisiones-de-la-cdmx>.
7. <https://www.animalpolitico.com/2020/05/cdmx-liberacion-personas-carcel/>.
8. https://coronavirus.gob.mx/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Protocolo_De_Actuacion_COVID-19_CEFERESOS.pdf.
9. <https://www.jornada.com.mx/ultimas/estados/2020/04/14/gobierno-de-edomex-suspende-las-visitas-a-las-carceles-por-el-covid-19-3849.html>.
10. <https://www.animalpolitico.com/2020/03/visitas-restringen-estados-carceles-covid-coronavirus/>.
11. <https://www.animalpolitico.com/2020/04/carceles-covid-19-distancia-insumos/>.
12. <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/en-espanol/noticias/story/2020-04-27/covid-19-y-carceles-latinoamericanas-un-coctel-explosivo>.
13. <https://www.cndh.org.mx/documento/la-cndh-manifiesta-su-preocupacion-por-el-indice-de-letalidad-en-las-prisiones-del-pais>.
14. <https://www.forbes.com.mx/noticias-suman-395-contagios-de-covid-19-en-prisiones/>.
15. <https://www.animalpolitico.com/2020/04/rina-penal-cuautitlan-edomex-reos-custodios-covid-19/>.
16. <https://www.elsoldetoluca.com.mx/local/protestan-afuera-de-los-penales-piden-atender-a-enfermos-y-prevenir-contagios-de-covid-19-5088060.html>.
17. Work in industries, usually factories, that allows these to be largely duty free and tariff-free.

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