

# WHISPERED LONGINGS: UNVEILING THE SILENT STRUGGLES OF INCARCERATED MOTHER IN BAGANGA SUB-PROVINCIAL JAIL

Cristine Joy G. Misoles<sup>1</sup>, Remart N. Cabrera<sup>2</sup>, Jilla Mae D. Susada<sup>3</sup>

*Bachelor of Science in Criminology  
Davao Oriental State University, Mahan-ob, Cateel, Davao Oriental, Philippines*

*Abstract:* The prison environment is unlikely to provide opportunities to foster mother-child relationships. This has given rise to various experiences and struggles that imprisoned individuals, especially mothers, endure over time. In line with this, the current study aimed to establish the experiences of persons deprived of liberty at the Baganga Sub-Provincial Jail, particularly mothers, based on their lived experiences as incarcerated mothers. The study commenced at Barangay Central, Baganga, Davao Oriental, where the Baganga Sub-Provincial Jail is located. This study utilized qualitative research as its method. A single case study design and in-depth interviews were employed for data gathering. Incarcerated mothers were selected through purposive sampling. The findings revealed key themes. Before incarceration, mothers maintained a strong parent-child bond, practiced supportive parenting, and found ways to support their children financially. During incarceration, they experienced regular visits but faced financial struggles, communication challenges, emotional pain, and difficulty continuing their maternal role from a distance. Coping mechanisms included seeking support from family and jail authorities. Despite physical limitations, incarcerated mothers perceived their relationships with their children as positive and resilient. Recommendations include improving programs that educate incarcerated mothers about their rights and support systems, encouraging family support from the beginning, and developing livelihood programs within correctional facilities to provide vocational training and employment opportunities.

*Keywords:* *whispered longings, struggles, incarcerated, mothers, jail, relational-cultural theory*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Maternal incarceration seemed indomitable and has still become prevalent worldwide. This phenomenon is highly detrimental to the family system (Fowler et al., 2021). It should be noted that between 2000 and 2017, the number of women and girls increased by a whopping 53% globally (Walmsley, 2018). The vast majority of these women are mothers – more than 80% of incarcerated women have at least one child (Swavola et al., 2016). Typically, justice-involved women – especially those in prisons and jails – are often neglected, unseen, and overlooked (Cobbina, 2021).

Furthermore, children with incarcerated mothers – particularly those from disadvantaged groups of society – face adverse social, health, and emotional circumstances, which exacerbate their vulnerability and inequalities (Rossiter et al., 2015). On the other hand, mothers held in carceral facilities face significant challenges in parenting their children, the experiences of such challenges which Rossiter and others (2015) aptly describe as “mothering at a distance.” The fact that so many women are primary caregivers to dependent children is an intergenerational problem, as studies show that when a mother is incarcerated, the odds that her children, especially her daughters, will experience arrest, conviction, and incarceration as adults significantly increase (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2016).

Given that parenting from behind bars is a unique experience from that of parenting from outside or in the community, the experience of doing so from prison is a crucial element to the inmate’s well-being and the adjustment of the family to incarceration (Carretero-Trigo et al., 2021). Once in prison, financial, physical, and emotional changes occur, which affects the incarcerated person’s family relationships and participation in their children’s lives (Carretero-Trigo et al., 2021), even – at times – during the preliminary stages of child development (Fochi et al., 2020) which may forever shatter the mother-child bond in the case of maternal incarceration. Being outside the home and the self-redefining that happens in the carceral environment often make the incarcerated parent feel anxious and inadequate in their parenting role (Carretero-Trigo et al., 2021).

Women report an acutely more painful experience of confinement when compared to men and that their psychological well-being and mental health are compromised by imprisonment (Crewe et al., 2017; Harner & Riley, 2013). Psychological and emotional distress are amplified for incarcerated mothers, as prisons were not designed to manage the

needs of mothers and their young children (e.g., Wattanaporn & Holtfreter, 2014). For many incarcerated mothers, family relationships are effectively severed during incarceration (Aiello & McCorkel, 2018).

Motherhood constitutes additional layers of limitation and opportunity for disadvantaged women both before and during incarceration (Kennedy et al., 2020). The significant increase in female incarceration in the last forty years has led to significant advances in scholarly research on imprisoned women (White & Cozza, 2023). However, some topics remain understudied. The present research aims to address this gap in the literature by expanding our understanding, drawing on the vulnerability of mothers and their experiences in correctional facilities.

In the Correctional Institution for Women in Mandaluyong City, Philippines, the majority of incarcerated mothers are highly experienced and concerned or worried about what might happen to their children and families during their incarceration (Sanchez, 2017). Another study has shown that incarcerated mothers considered their incarceration as suffering with an accompanying feeling of regret and that they are often unnoticed by the public at large; their dreams seem to be oblivious to many (Bayod et al., 2016). Although there is an increasing number of women experiencing incarceration internationally, their experiences of motherhood in prison are rarely studied, especially in the local context. Since this study articulates the experiences of incarcerated mothers, it is deemed appropriate to utilize qualitative studies. This current study will contribute to this matter. This research sought answers to the experiences and struggles incarcerated mothers faced while in prison.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative single case study as its research design. Qualitative research refers to the type of research that explores and provides deeper insights into real-world problems (Moser & Korstjens, 2017). Data are then organized to be drawn together into a cohesive whole (Morse and Field, 1996, as cited in Ehiahuruike, 2023). This research uses qualitative study, which mainly gathers data from the perceptions of an incarcerated mother. A single-case study is preferred since it includes only one participant (Lobo et al., 2017). According to Hunziker & Blankenagel (2021), a single case study research design is a collective term for an in-depth analysis of a small non-random sample. The focus of this design is on in-depth exploration in a real-life context. In line with this, this study seeks to have a deeper understanding of the experiences of incarcerated mothers. Experience and meaning appear as crucial concepts for reaching a deeper understanding of the participant's perspective. Toward that end, a single study was used for this study. Given that this study aims to explore the perceptions of mothers who are convicted in prison, a single case study is deemed appropriate for the current research study.

### 2.2 Research Procedure

From the conception of the study. First, researchers asked permission from the office of the REO of Davao Oriental State University-Cateel Campus. Second, the researchers obtained a letter of permission to conduct the study from the officer in charge of Baganga Sub-Provincial Jail. Upon the approval of the letter, the participant was chosen subjectively and informed and explained the purpose and nature of the study and their importance in completing the study. Third, Emphasizing the ethical considerations, the researchers asked the participant for permission to commence an in-depth interview after the individual was briefed. An informed consent form was obtained from the participant stating that he/she had already understood that his/her involvement was voluntary and that he/she had the right to withdraw at any time, and his/her responses were recorded. The informed consent form also included the prime purpose of the study as well as the researchers contact information in case the participant would like to clarify matters related to the interview. Our participant's information was kept separate from her details, and we were the only ones with access to such. Further, to ensure anonymity, a pseudonym was used to help conceal her identity instead of writing the participant's actual name. In this manner, the individual's privacy is ensured, and the participant herself would not be too worried about privacy invasion or information leakage. Fourth, the interview commenced via face-to-face interaction. The in-depth interview ran for around 60 minutes to ensure that the data needed for the study was obtained. During the interview with our participant, an incarcerated mother, the researchers first created a comfortable and safe environment to encourage open communication. The researchers began with introductory remarks, explaining the purpose of the interview and ensuring confidentiality. Then, we asked structured yet empathetic questions, allowing the participant to share her experiences, feelings, and challenges. Active listening techniques included nodding, maintaining eye contact, and providing verbal affirmations. The researchers also took notes and recorded the conversation (with consent) to ensure accurate documentation. Throughout the interview, the researchers were attentive to the participant's emotional state and offered support, ensuring the discussion remained respectful and non-judgmental. This approach gathered valuable insights and demonstrated genuine care and understanding of the participant's situation. Lastly, The researchers began by identifying and contacting the relatives and neighbors of the participant to corroborate her statements. The interview was conducted face-to-face to ensure a more personal and detailed interaction. Each interview lasted 5 to 15 minutes, allowing us to gather the necessary data comprehensively. During interviews, we used a voice recorder to secure and accurately capture information provided by the respondents. After conducting the interviews, the researchers transcribed the entire conversation to ensure every detail was noticed. The transcripts were then carefully reviewed and compiled into a script to support and validate the participants' statements.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 Parenting Experiences during Pre-Incarceration

The results of this study highlight the complex experiences of incarcerated mothers as they navigate the challenges of maintaining parental roles within the constraints of the prison system. Several key themes emerged from the analysis, illustrating these women's resilience and struggles. Among these themes are the strong parent-child bond, supportive parenting style, and continued financial support, each of which plays a critical role in sustaining family connections and ensuring the well-being of their children.

Table 1. Major themes and core ideas on the parenting experiences during pre-incarceration

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Strong parent-child bond	Close relationship with her three children
	Despite the participant's incarceration, the children remain close to her
Supportive parenting style	Provides for her children's needs without being strict
	Encourages her children to study hard and stay away from negative influences like addiction
Continued financial support	Finds ways to financially support her children, such as doing laundry for money even while incarcerated
	Prioritizes her children's needs, particularly her son's college expenses

#### 3.2 Experiences and struggles of mothers during incarceration

The experiences of incarcerated mothers highlight their resilience in maintaining relationships with their children despite significant challenges. Regular visits from family members help sustain strong bonds and provide crucial emotional support. Financial struggles and limited employment opportunities exacerbate their worries about meeting their children's needs. Communication barriers and emotional struggles, including the fear of not being able to guide their children, further impact their well-being. Nonetheless, many mothers provide guidance and support from a distance, demonstrating remarkable dedication.

Table 2. Major themes and core ideas on the experiences and struggles of mothers during incarceration

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Regular visits and family connection	Frequent and consistent visits from family members, particularly children, maintain strong family connections.
Financial struggles and lack of employment	Financial difficulties
	Worrying about children's needs
Communication challenges	Difficulty in communication
Emotional struggles and fear	Fear of not being aware of children's well-being
	The pain of not being able to guide children personally
Continued maternal role	Providing guidance from a distance
	Strategizing to meet children's needs

#### 3.3 Coping Mechanisms for Experiences and Struggles

The results reveal that incarcerated mothers rely heavily on support from family and relatives, who provide both financial and emotional assistance to help them navigate the challenges of incarceration. Siblings and extended family often step in to care for the children, ensuring their needs are met. Additionally, jail authorities play a crucial role in the process. These combined supports help alleviate hardships and are essential for maintaining the well-being and maternal roles of incarcerated mothers.

Table 3. Major themes and core ideas on the coping mechanisms for experiences and struggles during incarceration

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Seeking support from family and relatives	Siblings and relatives provide financial and emotional support
Assistance from jail authorities	Receiving financial and emotional support from jail authorities

#### 3.4 Perceptions of Relationship Quality with Children during Incarceration

The results highlight the incarcerated mother’s perception of her relationship quality with her children, revealing a positive and resilient bond characterized by emotional closeness and guidance. Despite the physical separation, she maintains a strong relationship through regular communication and expressions of love, leveraging respect and responsibility to nurture her role as a parent. However, the limitations of physical presence pose significant challenges, as she struggles to provide care and guidance from a distance.

Table 4. Major themes and core ideas on the perceptions of relationship quality with children during incarceration

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Positive and resilient relationship	Strong and consistent bond
	Emotional closeness and guidance
	Leveraging respect and responsibility
	Confidence in relationship quality
Limitations of physical presence	Limited ability to care for and guide children

### 3.5 Implications for Practice

The findings of this study on the experiences of incarcerated mother emphasize the necessity for comprehensive support systems within correctional facilities. Communities and prison staff must become more aware of the unique challenges faced by these mothers, including maintaining parent-child bonds, dealing with emotional and financial stress, and supporting their maternal roles. Increased awareness will benefit the mothers by promoting understanding and improving their mental health during incarceration. Addressing such problems faced by incarcerated mothers ensures they receive the support needed to maintain strong family connections and emotional stability.

This study can also aid families and friends in providing appropriate support for incarcerated loved ones. Family members and friends must be vigilant and proactive in providing emotional and practical assistance, recognizing their critical role in maintaining the mothers' well-being. The findings may enable the Department of Justice and related agencies to design and maintain programs that address the various challenges faced by incarcerated mothers, providing them with the necessary resources and support. Collaboration between community organizations, support networks, and prison authorities is essential to create a cohesive and effective support system for incarcerated mothers.

### 4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study have revealed that the experiences of incarcerated mothers are fraught with numerous and complex challenges. Participants encountered profound obstacles, including financial difficulties, lack of employment, communication challenges, emotional struggles, and fear. These challenges began with a pressing need to maintain family connections, adversely impacting their mental and emotional well-being. Additionally, they faced limited opportunities within the correctional facility, which significantly hindered their ability to fulfill their maternal roles. Although they managed to maintain contact with their children, the lack of support and opportunities within the facility substantially impacted their well-being.

As researchers, we faced significant time constraints, making balancing research demands with personal and educational responsibilities challenging. The process was also financially burdensome, requiring substantial monetary resources to cover costs associated with research materials, revisions, and other necessary expenses. Additionally, we encountered difficulties completing the research, often needing help from acquaintances to better understand and interpret the data. Despite these challenges, we received invaluable assistance from many individuals during moments of greatest difficulty. Reflecting on such an extensive process, the numerous challenges and periods of intense effort have become indistinct, but the most significant outcome is the completion of this thesis. With perseverance and the guidance of the Lord, we overcame these challenges and achieved success, for which we are deeply grateful.

### 5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We want to express our sincere gratitude to the following people who have contributed to and supported us in completing this study.

We thank God for His unwavering guidance and blessings throughout our research journey. Without His grace and support, this research would not have been possible

We thank our participant for her time and insights into our study. Without her, we could not have achieved our goal.

Our research coordinator, Ms. Marjorie B. Vallez, for being instrumental in the success of this research through her unwavering support, insightful guidance, and dedicated efforts.

Our research adviser, Ms. Jilla Mae D. Susada, for her invaluable guidance, unwavering support, and for her time and effort in checking our manuscript.

Our panelists, Ms. Rowena D. Monsalod, Mr. JR A. Mantog, and Ms. Leneth Pearl S. Pingot have significantly enhanced the depth and quality of our work through their expert insights, thoughtful feedback, and unwavering support.

We are also grateful to our family, friends, and loved ones for their unwavering support and encouragement throughout this research journey. Your belief in us and your constant motivation has been invaluable.

## 6. REFERENCES

- [1]Fowler, C., Rossiter, C., Power, T., Dawson, A., Jackson, D., & Roche, M. A. (2021). Maternal incarceration: Impact on parent–child relationships. *Journal of Child Health Care*, 26(1), 82–95. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13674935211000882>.
- [2]Walmsley, R. (2018). World Prison Population List. Institute for Criminal Policy Research, 12, 1–19. [https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/wpp1\\_12.pdf&ved=2ahUKEwiQnrq5o8uAAxUm1jgGHdwnD4wQFnoECBcQAQ&usg=AOvVaw1Xq6l8So\\_oPfdMDXGIU8t](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/wpp1_12.pdf&ved=2ahUKEwiQnrq5o8uAAxUm1jgGHdwnD4wQFnoECBcQAQ&usg=AOvVaw1Xq6l8So_oPfdMDXGIU8t)
- [3]Swavola, E., Riley, K., & Subramanian, R. (2016). Overlooked: Women and jails in an era of reform. New York: Vera Institute of Justice Retrieved from <http://www.safetyandjusticechallenge.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/overlooked-women-in-jails-report-web.pdf>.
- [4]Cobbina, J. E. (2021). Feminist Approaches to Justice: Addressing Incarcerated and Reentering Women Worldwide [Webinar]. United Nations Commission on the Status of Women 65. <https://ngocsw65forum.us2.pathable.com/meetings/virtual/tTFydYsoSGDnSpmNg>
- [5]Rossiter, C., Power, T., Fowler, C., Jackson, D., Hyslop D & Dawson, A. (2015) Mothering at a Distance: what incarcerated mothers' value about a parenting programme. *Contemporary Nurse*, 50 (2-3), 238-255. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10376178.2015.1105108>
- [6]Burgess-Proctor, A., Huebner, B. M., & Durso, J. M. (2016). Comparing the effects of maternal and paternal incarceration on adult daughters' and sons' criminal justice system involvement: A gendered pathways analysis. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 43(8), 1034–1055. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854816643122>
- [7]Carretero-Trigo, M., Carcedo, R., & Fernández-Rouco, N. (2021). Correlates of a Positive Parenting Experience in Prison. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(2), 626–. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18020626>
- [8]Fochi, M. D. C. S., Melo, L. L., Mendes-Castillo, A. M. C., & Lopes, M. H. B. M. (2020). Mothers mothering in prison: an experience report of the nursing care project. *Revista brasileira de enfermagem*, 73(3), e20180932. <https://doi.org/10.1590/0034-7167-2018-0932>
- [9]Crewe, B., Hulley, S., & Wright, S. (2017). Swimming with the tide: Adapting to long-term imprisonment. *Justice Quarterly*, 34, 517–541.
- [10]Wattanaporn, K. A., & Holtfreter, K. (2014). The impact of feminist pathways research on gender-responsive policy and practice. *Feminist Criminology*, 9, 191–207.
- [11]Aiello, B. L., & McCorkel, J. A. (2017). “It will crush you like a bug”: Maternal incarceration, secondary prisonization, and children’s visitation.” *Punishment & Society*, 20(3), 351–374. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1462474517697295>
- [12]Kennedy, S.C., Mennicke, A. & Allen, C. (2020). I took care of my kids: mothering while incarcerated. *Health Justice* 8, 12 <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40352-020-00109-3>
- [13]White, F. and Cozza, B. (2023). The Effects of Long-Term Incarceration on Women: An Investigation of the Re-Entry Journey of Four Long-Term Incarcerates Living at a Re-Entry Program. Department of Administrative and Instructional Leadership.
- [14]Sanchez, E. (2017). Problems Encountered by Incarcerated Mothers: Basis for Program Formulation. <https://ejournals.ph/article.php?id=15603>

- [15] Bayod, R. P., Cossid, R. L., Estrebello, F. V., Ferriols, F. E. T., & Labani, Q. J. H. (2016). The untold pains and dreams of incarcerated mothers. <https://ejournals.ph/article.php?id=11631>
- [16] Moser, A. and Korstjens, I. (2017). Series: Practical guidance to qualitative research. Part 1: Introduction. *Eur J Gen Pract.* 23(1):271-273.
- [17] Morse, J. M., & Field, P. A. (1996). The purpose of qualitative research. In Springer eBooks (pp. 1–17). [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4899-4471-9\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4899-4471-9_1)
- [18] Lobo, M. A., Moeyaert, M., Baraldi Cunha, A., & Babik, I. (2017). Single-Case Design, Analysis, and Quality Assessment for Intervention Research. *Journal of neurologic physical therapy : JNPT*, 41(3), 187–197. <https://doi.org/10.1097/NPT.0000000000000187>
- [19] Hunziker, S., & Blankenagel, M. (2021). Single case Research design. In Springer eBooks (pp. 141–170). [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-34357-6\\_](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-34357-6_)

