Behind Bars: Institutionalized Sexism

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Abstract

The content of this paper discusses Canadian, American and Filipino women and mothers who experience incarceration in some way, shape or form. Focusing on the mistreatment and inequality that women endure when; serving their sentences, when encountering prison systems as a visitor, or when sentenced mothers are away from their children and struggle to maintain their identity. This research evaluates a range of cases from the 1840s to the 2020s, with a focus on institutionalized sexism through a feminist lens using qualitative and quantitative research and data to support this argument.

History

Historical accounts of sexism play a large role in shaping the prison system we know in Canada today. An understanding of this history is a vital tool when analyzing and dissecting the prison system's effect on marginalized demographics as it outlines the past, contextualizes the present and informs the future. Women and girls experience subjugation, mistreatment, and abuse more frequently than other gender demographics (Statistics Canada, 2024); this is no different, if not exemplified, through our prison systems. Between the 18th and 19th century in Europe "women were denied the right to own property, to study, or to participate in public life" (Brunell, 2026, para. 2). Wendy Chan (2001) introduces the idea of the gender hierarchy in the social world in her book *Women, Murder, and Justice* to explain that women suffer from oppression due to living in a heterosexual organization, meaning that women in modern society are structurally disadvantaged from the men who are at the top of this hierarchy via unbalanced representation in the workforce, pay, and voting rights (p. 22). Discrimination and marginalization operate against women within the prison system as well, it was believed that female criminals were more dangerous due to their portrayal as madwomen whereas male criminals were portrayed to have possessed some reason and forethought in relation to their violent crimes (Britton, 2003, p. 29), developing a negative stigma towards incarcerated women that is determined by their gender, not their actions. In turn, this ideology deems that incarcerated women go against the expected societal role of femininity, revealing an unequal and unjust framework towards incarcerated women compared to their male counterparts. Though the discrimination against women went much further than these examples, the first and second waves of feminism changed history for women across the world, influencing each other while their rights were ever changing. Throughout these movements emerged major ideologies, the most relevant of which to this paper is the

> liberal or mainstream feminism, which focused its energy on concrete and pragmatic change at an institutional and governmental level. Its goal was to integrate women more thoroughly into power structure and to give women equal access to positions men had traditionally dominated (Burkett, 2026, Dissension and Debate section, para. 5).

This movement's goal was oriented to having equal rights within the education and work force, but is reflected within other governed institutions such as prison. The penal system continues to be designed for men, in turn not being prepared for women's occupancy of the system. There has been a clear social and gender hierarchy in our society reflecting through our prisons to keep men at the top of this while subjugating women to the bottom, keeping them in a vulnerable and subordinate position. Female prisoners were subject to physical assault and sexual abuse from the male guards (Van Wormer & Bartollas, 2011, p. 126), creating a detrimentally dangerous environment for women at the hands of those in a position of power over them. Neglect and abuse towards women has been a part of the prison system from their introduction.

I will detail the lived experience of women and mothers through their encounters with incarceration which encompasses the involvement of women both in and outside of the prison system, those currently serving time, those who have completed their sentence and those who visit loved ones. Subsequently, I will be discussing how institutionalized sexism has played a role in harming women who encounter the prison system, involving understandings of sexism and stereotypes that follow women and mothers through their lives. This paper proposes that due to these aggravating factors, women and mothers experience unjust mistreatment in the prison system through ingrained, internalized and integrated discrimination.

Women in Prison

For the purpose of this paper, incarceration, jail and prison are all terms that are used generally to mean imprisoned or confined. While Canadian demographics are the main focus for this topic and where majority of the data and findings are from, I use research worldwide where necessary and appropriate in order to fill missing data gaps that are not yet discussed in Canada.

Women who have been incarcerated endure mistreatment through many means, and while this can be apparent, I argue that this discrimination goes deeper than 'surface level' means of oppression towards women through the prison system. Mistreatment occurs through means of control and power by the institution as well as the integration of sexism into modern society. Generally speaking, prison is a term associated with men, making incarcerated women a phenomenon and their existence in this space is treated as abnormal, which is why it is critical to include the female perspective and experience that occurs within and throughout the prison system in the broader societal narrative. The prison system has been, and still is, male dominated in terms of prisoners, staffing and ownership. With the prison system being tailored towards men, shown through history, women who are involved with incarceration often encounter a sense of invisibility within the system (Logan, 2008, p. 117), as imprisoned women have a far different and unequal experience to imprisoned men. One reason for this is that there are far fewer female-only prisons. Alberta, for example, has one female-only prison, and only five out of the total forty-three prisons across Canada are women only (Correctional Service Canada, 2025). A consequence of this disparity is that a woman sentenced to one of these prisons may be placed much further from their homes and support systems, compared to men, who have closer and more abundant prisons across the province and country. Due to the

distance, it is much less attainable for families or friends to visit an inmate during their sentence, making women feel more 'inside' or isolated, in comparison to their male counterparts (Logan, 2008, p. 118).

Because of the physical distance and the difficulty of visitation, it is more likely for family ties to become strained or break over time. This is not only detrimental to the mental health of these women residing in prison, but also to their overall success rate after being released. This aggravating factor may lead women and their families into a traumatic cycle as they experience a second layer of discrimination from the penal system (Van Wormer & Bartollas, 2011, p. 135). In addition, these cycles may persist from the lack of preventative and in-prison social programs and connections, including friends, family, school, work or other ecological surroundings that these women are stripped of when they enter prison. Occupational, psychological and educational rehabilitation are all social programs that can be offered to prisoners who are nearing the end of their sentence to better their chances of successful reintegration into society. For example, education rehabilitation alone reduced prisoners' recidivism rate by 43% compared to the prisoners who did not take this program (Davis et al., 2013, p. 57). These factors stack to create a safety net for individuals leaving prison. Receiving an education or learning a skill can create job opportunities, which creates financial stability, creating housing and food stability. The current lack of social care programs can add to the struggle to start over and regain these basic living necessities alongside family and friend relationships.

Women experience this sense of subordination over them when encountering the prison system even when they are not the ones who are incarcerated. This occurs when they are attempting to visit their loved ones who are in prison where women often "experience restricted rights, diminished resources, social marginalization, and other consequences of penal confinement, even though they are legally innocent" (Comfort, 2003, p. 79). As they are ordered extremely specific instructions on what they are to do, say and wear. This is targeted towards women more so than men as many of the restrictions are defined by clothing, specifically on dresses, skirts and tank tops. Considering that about 95% of the visitors in a given day are women, this can be seen as a gender targeted control system (Comfort, 2003, p. 81). Women within the prison system are fighting and struggling to maintain a sense of self within a structure that isolates and degrades them (Zaitzow & Thomas, 2006, p. 37), creating a battle that occurs both externally with the prison system and internally with their social needs and identity.

Mothers in Prison

Moreover, the mistreatment and punishment of incarcerated mothers can be understood through the concept of intersectionality. The term intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to describe Black women's experience during the civil rights movement and feminist activism, illuminating the struggle of racism and sexism simultaneously. "Black women were forced to confront the interplay between racism and sexism and to figure out how to make Black men think about gender issues while making white women think about racial issues" (Burkett, 2026, The Race Factor section, para. 1). While this is an incredibly important topic to discuss, the scope of this paper is simply not large enough to encompass race alongside

gender and maternity. For the purposes of this paper, intersectionality will refer to the experienced reality of being a woman as well as a mother, of any race and/or ethnicity.

There is a stigma that society places on women in the prison system as well as the labels that are placed on mothers who are in prison, both of which goes against what society understands as being 'normative' for this demographic and gender. Meaning that society has an expectation for how women are to behave, and an even stricter code for mothers. For example, a mother is expected to be the picture of perfection, having to raise her children to be educated, moral and well behaved while she maintains a certain level of responsibility at work in addition to her social life. On top of this, there are societal depictions of what it means to have committed a crime, an example being 'once a criminal, always a criminal', or that they may never be able to reintegrate into society properly, they shouldn't be around children, regardless of their committed crime, and that they should never hold a respectable job. The dehumanization of mothers continues as identity crises occur within themselves based on the internalized and externalized societal definition of what it means to be incarcerated, to be a mother, and to be an incarcerated mother.

This is harmful to incarcerated mothers as society stereotypes and stigmatizes them by labelling them as "unfit" and implying an inability to mother from their position (Easterling et al., 2018). This demographic experiences intersectional discrimination as the societal narrative states that they are uncaring and neglectful mothers and that their children would be better off without them (Van Wormer & Bartollas, 2011, p. 134). However this is not the same narrative that we hear about fathers in prison. The causes and experiences of mothers in prison, including abuse, addiction and victimization, are commonly overlooked and downplayed (Van Wormer & Bartollas, 2011, p. 134) because the title of a mother takes precedence over the title of a human being. Society has given these women the 'bad mother image' regardless if the crime they have committed directly involves the harm of their children or not. In reality, many mothers are driven to commit crimes based on their economic status to provide for their children, which ultimately leads to their incarceration. One paper outlines cases where mothers will commit forms of robbery in order to meet their child's basic needs in life, such as food and schooling supplies (Griffin et al., 2025, p. 223). Women receive a much harsher stigma than fathers do as they are judged in a way that fathers are not (Van Wormer & Bartollas, 2011, p.144). Women are not seeing the same narrative pushed on fathers or seeing labels of 'bad fathers' or criticizing their ability to parent from their position in prison. A large reason for this is due to an implicit expectation that a mother will be there for their child on the outside, a stigma that compounds negatively on mothers. The expectation of mothers versus fathers is deeply rooted in historical sexism of gender roles and 'motherly' duties, always expecting a mother to be there, while it is far more common and acceptable for a father to be absent.

In the prison system, mothers are viewed as doubly deviant, first for their crime and second for their perceived parental failure (Haakmat & Matthews, 2024, p. 575); this impact from the stigmatization leads mothers to feel marginalized and question their identities as to what it means to be a mother. "These women find themselves in a setting where their maternal instincts and roles as providers are severely restricted" if not completely removed (Griffin et al., 2025, p. 223). Trying to obtain a mothering position and identity proves to be difficult in many ways,

including the obstacles for children attending visits, the costs and restrictions of phone calls, and even the decisions that the mothers must make if they wish to tell their children about their imprisonment (Walsh et al., 2023, p. 218). This prevents mothers from fulfilling their parental role while also struggling with themselves in understanding what they can do to accommodate theirs and their children's needs in defining motherhood from prison.

Comparing the narratives of mothers in prison to the narratives of fathers in prison, there is a stark difference not only in the imposed stigma from society but also in the lived experience of the fathers as they talk about themselves and the time they are serving their sentence. A quote from an incarcerated father stating that "jail saved [him]," outlines a narrative in which many fathers like himself establish that jail was a place for them to become better fathers for their children after they have served their sentences (Schultz et al., 2023, p. 168). Incarcerated mothers speaking about their time away from their children compared to incarcerated fathers have a drastically different outlook on their children in this situation. Fathers focus on how they can do better for their children once they are released from prison, whereas mothers focus on how they can do better for their children while they are still in prison. These parental duties could include helping with homework over the phone or trying to work with caregivers in disciplining their children. This is important for mothers as much as it is for their children. Trying to maintain a sense of control in an otherwise powerless position and attempting to create normalcy for both the mother and child, is vital for the fostering of a sense of self. Mothers, in this case, are distraught trying to come to terms with understanding what it means to be a mother when their circumstances are contradictory to their normal routine to both mother and child. The marginalization from the mother-child relationship can cause doubt and questioning of the mother's identity (Haakmat & Matthews, 2024, p. 575), while the fathers have not indicated their uncertainty on the matter of their relationships.

Conclusion

Women have been mistreated and oppressed through ingrained sexism in our society, but within the penal system women and mothers additionally face higher levels of marginalization and discrimination than men. History in the criminal justice system has laid a path for understanding where many of our modern-day issues stem from, and through a feminist lens, I have shown why this has not changed. The social and gender hierarchy was built by and for men, and has seeped into many aspects of our society, including the prison system. Women are suffering in our prisons because of the way the system was constructed with men in mind and has been unwilling to change when women were introduced. Women and mothers alike have been at the receiving end of constant subordination and oppression that society has reflected on them through the normalization of mistreatment through incarceration. Creating a reality that reinforces inequality by reconstituting patriarchal discrimination within our modern prison systems.

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