

# THE ROMANIAN WIVES OF PRISONERS

Liliana FOCA \*

## Abstract

Recent studies show that more than 10.1 million people are incarcerated throughout the world, the prison population having increased worldwide in 78 percent of the countries from 2009 to 2011 (Walmsley 2011). In Romania, the National Prison Administration reported in 2014 a total of 30156 prisoners of which 28577 were over 22 years of age. These figures are an indication that many of the imprisoned people have families and partners on the outside. Prisoners' wives represent a topic that has been little approached in the literature. This study explores the impact of imprisonment on marital relationships and on the wellbeing of Romanian wives of prisoners by collecting information from thirteen women through in depth interviews. The findings suggest that the wives of prisoners are affected not just by the stigmatizing role of being the wife of an inmate, but mostly by the ignorance of their partners with respect to the feelings and hardships the women experience while being on the outside.

**Keywords:** prisoners 'wives, marital relations, prisoners, wellbeing, imprisonment

## Résumé

Des études récentes montrent que plus de 10,1 millions de gens sont emprisonnés dans le monde, la population carcérale ayant augmenté dans 78 pour cent des pays pendant 2009 à 2011 (Walmsley 2011). En Roumanie, L'Administration Nationale des Prisons a annoncé en 2014 un total de 30.156 prisonniers des lesquels 28.577 ont dépassé l'âge de 22 ans. Ces chiffres sont une indication que beaucoup des prisonniers ont des familles et des partenaires à l'extérieur. Les femmes des détenus représentent un sujet qui n'est pas très approché dans la littérature. L'étude que je propose explore l'impact de l'emprisonnement sur les relations maritales et sur le bien-être des femmes Roumaines des prisonniers par des informations collectés recueillies auprès de 13 femmes en utilisant des interviews en profondeur. Les résultats suggèrent que les femmes des détenus ne sont pas affectées seulement par la stigmatisation du rôle d'être la femme d'un détenu, mais plutôt par ce que leurs partenaires ignorent les sentiments et les difficultés que les femmes traversent à l'extérieur.

**Mots-clés:** les femmes des prisonniers, relations conjugales, les prisonniers, bien-être, l'emprisonnement

## Rezumat

Studiul recent arată că în lume sunt încarcerați peste 10.1 milioane de oameni, iar populația carcerală a crescut în 78 la sută din țări în perioada 2009–2011 (Walmsley 2011). În România, Administrația Națională a Penitenciarelor a raportat în 2014 un total de 30.156 deținuți din care 28.577 cu vârste peste 22 ani. Aceste cifre indică faptul că mulți dintre deținuți au propriile familii și parteneri în libertate. Soțiile deținuților reprezintă un subiect puțin abordat în literatura de specialitate. Acest studiu explorează impactul detenției asupra

---

\* PhD Candidate, Centre for Childhood Applied Studies, University of Huddersfield, UK; e-mail: liliana\_foca@yahoo.com

relațiilor maritale și asupra bunăstării soțiilor din România ai căror parteneri sunt în închisoare prin analiza informațiilor obținute din interviurile în profunzime realizate cu treisprezece soții de deținuți. Rezultatele arată că soțiile deținuților sunt afectate nu doar de rolul stigmatizant de a fi soție de deținut, ci în special de ignoranța partenerilor lor cu privire la sentimentele și greutățile pe care acestea le trăiesc în libertate.

**Cuvinte cheie:** soții de deținuți, relații marital, deținuți, bunăstare, detenție

## 1. Literature review

Studies that have been looking into the area of marital relationships have found that incarceration has a dissolutive effect on marriages. Apel *et al.* have analysed data from the Criminal Career and Life-Course Study developed at the Netherlands Institute for the Study of Crime and Law Enforcement using a sample of 2,790 men with at least one conviction between 18 and 38 years of age. Their findings point out that the men in the sample face a probability of 56.8% to divorce by the fifth year after release. However, the authors underline that children represent a factor for stability, the likelihood for divorce in the case of convicted married men with children being smaller than in the case of married men without children (Apel *et al.* 2009, p. 291). Theobald and Farrington report from the Cambridge Study on Delinquent Development on the factors that contribute to marital disruption: “a wife with a conviction(s), being convicted, a poor relationship with parents, no examination passed, and having unprotected sex and a shotgun marriage” (Theobald and Farrington 2012, p. 404).

However, not all marriages break following imprisonment. Research on marital relations underline three main periods of imprisonment that may cause changes at individual level as well as within the couple as result of incarceration: pre-sentence, keeping contact during imprisonment, and living through incarceration (Fishman 1981; Hong Chui 2010).

The trial period bears significant consequences on the couple as it can last from days to months, and even years. During this period the couple faces emotional stress caused by the imminence of the temporary marital rupture, by questions related to actual guilt, financial burden due to large expenses on lawyers' fee and other additional trial costs, and also by the long waiting for the sentence (Lowenstein 1986; Codd 2008).

Fishman (1990) has looked into the marital relationships using the point of view of the prisoners' wives in a qualitative study comprising interviews with 30 women from Vermont, United States of America. One aspect arising from Fishman's study is the quality of the intimate relationship between the spouses during imprisonment. Due to prison policies and rules, most often couples are not allowed to have sexual relations or to exhibit their affection through touches. Their sole resources of intimate contact thus remain verbal communication while visiting, letters and phone calls. This has repercussions on the quality of the relationship, sexual deprivation being the most common reason for frustration not just for the prisoners,

but also for their wives on the outside. Jealousy from the imprisoned men and also the infidelity of their wives represent responses to this sexual deprivation that in turn leads to deterioration of the couple's relationship. Prison visitation is a topic underlining traumatic and shameful experiences for the women due to body searches, disrespectful behaviour of the prison staff towards the wives, or to lack of privacy. However, prison visitation has also been described as having positive effects such as increased quality of communication and a period of renewed courtship where the couples begin making plans for the future. These plans however are not approached in a realistic manner since they include easy getting jobs or being a united family without detailed discussions on how will these be put into practice. The findings are similar to those mentioned by Comfort *et al.* (2005) in a study on 20 women that were visiting men at a California prison: couples make use of the imprisonment period to place their relationship in a romanticized and rather non-realistic fantasy where each leave behind past mistakes and create the picture of a future based on mutual love and support.

The family economic hardship, single parenthood, stigma, shame, confusion, stress, or depression that are experienced by the women have a cumulative effect making the period of imprisonment a difficult time to cope (Arditti, Burton, and Neeves-Botelho 2010). On Lowenstein's view, the way women handle this period depends on the characteristics of the wife and those of the family. Her research on 118 Jewish prisoners' wives conclude: "The better educated wife had a more realistic perception of her situation and more marketable employment skills. The basic element of family systems resources affecting coping were role division and family cohesiveness." (Lowenstein 1984, p. 707). Fishman on the other hand, describes the imprisonment period as a very difficult time due to lack of family support, difficulties in finding or maintaining a job as well as in childrearing and discipline. But the imprisonment may also trigger positive changes in women as they learn to become more independent in handling the household and the family financial matters (Fishman 1990; Wildeman and Western 2010).

## **2. Method**

The present study was designed to find answers on the impact of incarceration on children as well as on partners of prisoners. This article though, focuses only on the wives of the prisoners and presents findings using data from thirteen interviews with women whose husbands are incarcerated in a maximum security prison in Iasi, Romania. A qualitative approach through in-depth interviews was chosen to address the following questions: What was the pre-imprisonment marital context? How do marital relationships change during imprisonment? What are the factors that produce the changes? and How do women perceive the return of their imprisoned partners in the context of their romantic relationship? The study design and the interview questions have been reviewed and granted approval by the School Research Ethics Panel at the School of Human and Health Sciences,

University of Huddersfield, UK where this research is being developed as part of a PhD programme.

### **2.1. Participants**

The inclusion criteria for women's participation were: (1) to have had a minimum of three years of marriage or marriage-like relationship with the imprisoned partner before imprisonment; (2) to have children aged 9 to 18; and (3) to be willing to participate in the research. The women in this research were aged 29 to 48 years. All women were living with their children; eight of them resided in rural areas and five of them were living Iasi city. Ten of the women were legally married and three of them have lived in a consensual relationship with the imprisoned men. With respect to the level of education, six women have graduated high-school and seven of them have not completed secondary school.

### **2.2. Procedure**

The participants were recruited through Alternative Sociale Association, a local NGO working with children of prisoners. The procedure included a question on the willingness to participate addressed by the social worker managing interventions for children of prisoners to their mothers. The women who had agreed to take part in the research were then invited to the NGO office and presented the research. Consent forms were formally signed.

The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour and 15 minutes and included: socio-demographic characteristics of the wife and open-ended questions on the history of the romantic relationships, changes that have occurred throughout time and during imprisonment, perceived level of satisfaction on the current relationship, prospects with regards to family reunification. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.

### **2.3. Limitations**

This study was designed to explore the impact of incarceration on family members, namely children and wives of prisoners. Its purpose was not to respond in an exhaustive manner to questions related to consequences of imprisonment on the quality of the romantic relationship, but rather to make a start on the subject. The selection of the participants was not random and the very small sample most certainly does not represent the entirety of women who are married or have a long lasting relationship with prisoners.

## **3. Results**

Three main areas for discussion emerged from the interviews: 1) pre-imprisonment relationship; 2) coping with imprisonment; and 3) prospects for reunification.

These are presented in detail, with selected quotes chosen to illustrate the impact of imprisonment on the Romanian wives.

### **3.1. Pre-imprisonment relationship**

All women in the study have characterized their first year of relationship as based on mutual affection. However, the years to follow were described in terms of good as well as difficult moments.

„We used to be a very happy couple. He used to bring me flowers and make me laugh. We were good together. We also had some bad moments, but we were together, like a family.” (29 years old)

„At the beginning we were ok, I was very pleased that my husband did not disrespect or beat me as I was seeing in other marriages of my girlfriends. Yes, things changed with time. Before his arrest things were hard for us because none of us had a job... feelings... yes, but when life gets tough... people start fights. After all, love also goes through the stomach. On and all we were ok... as long as he was with me, with good and bad, it was ok.” (30 years old)

The arrival of children has produced changes in that the expenses of the family have increased and the couple's interests have separated: the women were focused on raising the children and bringing food on the table, while the men tended to avoid their responsibilities by taking too much alcohol. Domestic violence is also mentioned during this period.

„We got married in 1985. We married out of love but love doesn't keep the hunger away. I thought he'd find a job and then the children came and our days got worse. The truth is he was a sloth, pretending he was ill but in fact looking only after his soul. I realized that pretty soon and heavy drinking and beating started. I've stayed because I was taught that a family means a mother, a father and children.” (52 years old)

Other women recall their early romantic years in more favourable words while being a poor couple. Money seem to have caused their men to distance themselves from the family by finding new partners or by making friends with people involved in criminal activities.

„2 years after we met we had our daughter. We had good and bad moments. It was when he had money that he left home in every meaning: he used to leave and not come back for two weeks in a row. I knew he was with other women because he made no effort in hiding it and we were supposed to act as if nothing had happened. But I know he loves me and he'd come back to me no matter what.” (41 years old)

„He used to like alcohol and women. More so, he became friends with some trouble-making people. I did not agree with him and I told him so and we'd start big fights and every time he'd leave home. What could I do? Where would I go with my son?” (29 years old)

Although the relationship of the women in the study had started under the premises of love, soon in their marriage they have experienced domestic violence, men

drinking alcohol and cheating. And yet, the women remained with their husbands for reasons that have to do with the education they received, wanting for their children to be raised by a father, or simply because they had no other place to go to while hoping their partners would, someday, change.

### **3.2. Coping with imprisonment**

Due to lack of financial resources women cannot visit and the telephone calls are very rare. This is disturbing for the wives who hope to hear from their husbands.

„I am very stressed, I don't like anything. I am usually a strong woman, but I have become very sensitive. I don't speak with the people in the village because they don't mean well. I keep it all inside me and this drains the energy out of me. I work all day long just not to think of him. I'm very jealous because I hear that he calls his mother and his sister and I wonder why he doesn't call me!? It's been a year since I last saw him and more than two weeks since we last spoke and it's very hard for me... I feel as if he's leaving me and our child.” (36 years old)

For other women, keeping the relationship is difficult because they feel burdened with house chores, bills to pay and children to take care of. At the same time, the demands of their husbands make them feel outraged:

„This is no long lasting relationship... I had to face a lot of problems... I feel pity for him knowing he is alone in that cell... but I have no more patience to listen... he calls almost every day to ask for something. Really: don't you ask me how I am, how I feel or if I can go on?! I don't have any patience anymore... I have to help my children.” (48 years old)

„He is no longer connected with the life here. It is as if life has turned into bills and obligations. He reads a lot because he does nothing all day and gives me advices, but I cannot divide myself between the land, the children and the visits. There are moments when, if I'd like to eat something, I'd rather not to turn the lights on.” (48 years old)

„I haven't been to visit in two months, but this is because I have nothing to give him... I go there and he asks for a lot of things and we go into fights. I told him I can hardly manage the money, the bills and the children and there's nothing to renounce to in order to bring things to him. He told me to go and ask from his mother, but I cannot go there every day to tell her to give me money...” (41 years old)

Some women seem to cope with the imprisonment in better terms:

„Our relationship hasn't changed. I visit him. I've been there even three times in a month, but there were months when I haven't visited him at all because I had no money. We talk about everything: the children, the house, debts... he says that when he's coming out we'll be happy. I say ok, we'll see...” (41 years old)

„When I first found out about the arrest I was shocked. But now I think our relationship is much stronger because it is hard for both of us and we suffer a great deal... they gave him 5 years and there are still 2 to go... we see each other once in two weeks and we make plans to be a normal family again.” (30 years old)

For other women, having a husband in jail has brought positive changes:

“May be now I am calmer because I have the freedom to organize my house and my debts... it’s easier now... when he used to be around there were expenses I could not control and I had to tell him days before about a payment that was due... I feel sorry because the children are very attached to him...” (41 years old)

„It’s been 29 years since I’m with this man. I don’t recall beautiful things... In 1993 he was arrested for the first time for attempted murder... I had children then too and all the hard life was on my shoulders... My youth was very... to be happy?! to live like other women?! I knew only that I had to work, to cook, to take care of the children... He was no father to the children, had never worked in his life. My neighbours ask me why I don’t remarry. I say I don’t want this anymore! God gave me a cross and I shall bear it to the end. But for now I feel free.” (52 years old)

### **3.3. Prospects for reunification**

The experiences of women who took part in this research vary considerably. Those women who did not experience domestic violence tend to imagine the life after imprisonment as a normal and happy life, whilst the women who suffered from men beating are afraid of the day their husband would be released from prison:

“I dreamt one night that he came home and I was yelling and calling for help... I woke up screaming and I couldn’t go back to sleep. Sometimes I’m afraid to go to sleep. I added a new lock to my door. I don’t even want to think of that day.” (52 years old)

There are also women that feel tired of waiting for their husbands and seem to have given up hope:

“I no longer hope to be a family as we once were... I have come to a point where I decided that I should be my own psychologist... I was walking alone on the street one day, after visiting him and I felt like crying, but I told myself that I need to pay attention to the road... I even postponed my crying... I think I’m very tired...” (48 years old)

„I don’t know... I don’t want to think of it... It hurts me not knowing when he’s coming out, I have no news from him and I think that the eyes that don’t meet...” (36 years old)

„May be after all this time he’d come to his senses. I told him I don’t need money, I don’t need stuff. I just want him to work so we could afford to pay our rent and to help the children.” (41 years old)

## **4. Conclusions**

The interviews developed with thirteen wives of prisoners have brought an insight on the difficulties Romanian women face as result of their life partners being imprisoned. Although all relationships have benefited from a romantic start, changes occurred even before the imprisonment: child rearing as well as men’s alcohol abuse, violent behaviour, and promiscuous living seem to have caused a

shift in women's perception of their relationship. This is concordant with other research emphasizing pre-existing factors causing parental imprisonment (Murray 2008; Phillips *et al.* 2006; Murray and Murray 2010).

However, further changes occur in the women and in their perception of the relationship during imprisonment. These changes seem to be caused by the feeling of being overwhelmed with house duties and expenses. In this context, not being supported by their respective husbands and partners who are, in return, very demanding in satisfying their own needs create a double reaction: on one hand the women feel resentful of such a lack of responses, whilst on the other hand they show sympathy towards their partners and resignation for their own situation.

It is this track of events together with the long waiting for their husbands' release that make most women reluctant in imagining the future of their relationships.

However, this is not the case of women who have experienced long periods of violence from their husbands and who are still under threats from jail. They have not been spared from the hardships of being a temporary single parent or the wife of a prisoner. Imprisonment may have brought a positive change in their lives with the absence of their abusive partner, but the future of their marriages is described with fear.

The narratives that were presented in this paper call for attention towards women's need for support while coping with the imprisonment of their partners. Although programs for children of prisoners are at a beginning stage in Romania, they should also be extended at the level of the entire family. The need for services evidenced in this study point towards individual or women support group, but family interventions also represent a place to start. It is a task for NGOs, social services and policy makers alike to see that the families of prisoners are not overlooked.

Findings of this paper may also lead to other, more extensive research that could take a deeper look into the lives of the women and of the families of prisoners based on larger samples that could be investigated through prospective studies. Research should also consider mother-child relationship using clinical instruments to assess behavioral and emotional problems of children (Sharratt *et al.* 2015) as part of strategies aiming for family wellbeing policies.

### **Acknowledgment**

This paper is made and published under the aegis of the Research Institute for Quality of Life, Romanian Academy as a part of programme co-funded by the European Union within the Operational Sectorial Programme for Human Resources Development through the project for Pluri and interdisciplinary in doctoral and post-doctoral programmes Project Code: POSDRU/159/1.5/S/141086



## References

1. Arditti, J.A. (2012). *Parental Incarceration and the Family. Psychological and Social Effects of Imprisonment on Children, Parents, and Caregivers*. New York University Press, New York.
2. Arditti, J.A. (2003). Locked Doors and Glass Walls: Family Visiting at a Local Jail. *Journal of Loss and Trauma: International Perspectives on Stress and Coping*, **8**(2), 115-138.
3. Codd, H. (2007). Prisoners' Families and Resettlement: A Critical Analysis. *The Howard Journal*, **46**(3), 255-263.
4. Codd, H. (2008). *In the Shadow of Prison: Families, Imprisonment and Criminal Justice*, Willan Publishing, Oregon.
5. Comfort, M., Grinstead, O., McCartney, K., Bourgois, P., Knight, K. (2005). "You Can't Do Nothing in This Damn Place": Sex and Intimacy Among Couples With an Incarcerated Male Partner. *The Journal of Sex Research*, **42**(1), 3-12.
6. Crowell, J., Owens, G. (1998). *Manual for The Current Relationship Interview And Scoring System*. Version 4. Retrieved (current date) from [http://www.psychology.sunysb.edu/attachment/measures/content/crri\\_manual.pdf](http://www.psychology.sunysb.edu/attachment/measures/content/crri_manual.pdf).
7. Dallaire, D.H., Ciccone, A., Wilson, L.C. (2010). Teachers' experiences with and expectations of children with incarcerated parents. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, **31**, 281-290.
8. Fishman, L.T. (1990). *Women at the Wall. A Study of Prisoners' Wives Doing Time on the Outside*. State University of New York Press, Albany.
9. Geller, A., Garfinkel, I., Western, B. (2011). Paternal Incarceration and Support for Children in Fragile Families. *Demography*, **48**, 25-47.
10. Hoffman Fishman, S. (1981). Losing a Loved One to Incarceration: The Effect of Imprisonment on Family Members. *The Personnel and Guidance Journal*, 372-378.
11. Johnston, D. (2012). Services for Children of Incarcerated Parents. *Family Court Review*, **50**(1), 91-105.
12. Lowenstein, A. (1984). Coping with Stress: The Case of Prisoners' Wives. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, **46**(3), 699-708.
13. Lowenstein, A. (1986). Temporary Single Parenthood – The Case of Prisoners' Families. *Family Relations*, **35**(1), 79-85.
14. Murray, J., Farrington, D.P. (2005). Parental imprisonment: effects on boys' antisocial behavior and delinquency through the life course. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, **46**(12), 1269-1278.
15. Murray, J., Farrington, D.P. (2006). Evidence-based programs for children of prisoners. *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, **5**(4), 721-736.
16. Murray, J. (2008). The cycle of punishment: social exclusion of prisoners and their children. *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, **7**(1), 55-81.
17. Murray, J., Murray, L. (2010). Parental incarceration, attachment and child psychopathology. *Attachment and Human Development*, **12**(4), 289-309, DOI: 10.1080/14751790903416889.
18. Murray, J., Farrington, D.P., Sekol, I. (2012). Children's Antisocial Behaviour, Mental Health, Drug Use, and Educational Performance after Parental Incarceration: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*. Advance online publication. DOI: 10.1037/a0026407.

19. Parke, R.D. (2003). Development in the Family. *Annual Review of Psychology*, **55**, 365-399, DOI: 10.1146/annurev.psych.55.090902.141528.
20. Phillips, S.D., Burns, B.J., Wagner, H.R., Kramer, T.L., Robbins, J.M. (2002). Parental Incarceration among Adolescents Receiving Mental Health Services. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, **11**(4), 385-399.
21. Phillips, S.D., Erkanli, A., Keeler, G.P., Costello, E.J., Angold, A. (2006). Disentangling the risks: parent criminal justice involvement and children's exposure to family risks. *Criminology and Public Policy*, **5**(4), 677-702.
22. Sampson, R.J., Laub, J.H. (1997). A Life-Course Theory of Cumulative Disadvantage and the Stability of Delinquency. In *Developmental Theories of Crime and Delinquency*, Terrence P. Thornberry, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick.
23. Sharratt, K., Foca, L., Gavriluta, C., Jones, A., Asiminei, R. (2015). Dimensionality and Construct Validity of the Romanian Self-Report Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). *Romanian Journal of Applied Psychology*, **16**(2). West University of Timisoara
24. Shaw, R. (1991). Imprisoned fathers and the orphans of justice. In *Prisoners' Children: What Are the Issues?* Routledge, London.
25. Shlafer, R.J., Poehlmann, J. (2010). Attachment and caregiving relationships in families affected by parental incarceration. *Attachment and Human Development*, **12**(4), 395-415.
26. Tasca, M., Turanovic, J.J., White, C., Rodriguez, N. (2014). Prisoners' Assessments of Mental Health Problems among Their Children. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, **58**(2), 154-173.
27. Theobald, D., Farrington, D. P. (2012). The effects of marital breakdown on offending: results from a prospective longitudinal survey of males. *Psychology, Crime and Law*, **19**(4), 391-408.
28. Turanovic, J.J., Rodriguez, N., Pratt, T. (2012). The Collateral Consequences of Incarceration Revisited: A Qualitative Analysis of the Effects on Caregivers of Children of Incarcerated Parents. *Criminology*, **50**(4), 913-959.
29. Walmsley, R. (2011). *World Prison Population (ninth edition)*. International Centre for Prison Studies, University of Essex.
30. Wakefield, S., Wildeman, C. (2011). Mass imprisonment and racial disparities in childhood behavioral problems. *American Society of Criminology*, **10**(3), 793-817.
31. Western, B. (2007). *Punishment and Inequality in America*. Russell Sage Foundation, New York.
32. Wildeman, C., Western, B. (2010). Incarceration in Fragile Families. *The Future of Children*, **20**(2), 157-177.
33. Wildeman, C., Schnittker, J., Turney, K. (2012). Despair by Association? The Mental Health of Mothers of Children by Recently Incarcerated Fathers. *American Sociology Review*, **77**, 216-243.