

# MOTHERHOOD BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER INCARCERATION

**Before, Behind, and Beyond Bars:** Motherhood Among Previously Incarcerated Women in the  
Western Cape.



**REBECCA FULLERTON BRISCOE**

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**Supervisors:**

Dr Mandisa Malinga

Dr Maxine Spedding

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## DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*I dedicate my dissertation to my beloved mother, who saw the start of this journey but could not stay to see its end. I miss you every day.*

To my brother, my biggest advocate and confidant. Your unwavering support, endless encouragement, and belief in me has given me great strength throughout this journey. I could not have done this without you. This work is as much yours as it is mine. Thank you for always being by my side. To my father, your guidance, wisdom, and unconditional love has been the foundation of my success. You have always been my role model, and your strength has inspired me to persevere in the face of challenges. Thank you for believing in me and for being the steadfast support I needed to complete this journey. To my best friend, for being my constant source of joy and laughter. Your friendship has been a beacon of light through the toughest moments of this journey. Thank you for believing in me, even when I doubted myself. To my editor, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to you, Gaby Turi, whose expertise, dedication, and unwavering support have been instrumental throughout this journey. Your meticulous attention to detail, insightful feedback, and patience have significantly enhanced the quality of this work. Thank you for helping me bring my ideas to life with clarity and precision. To my supervisors, your insightful guidance, patience, and wisdom have been invaluable. Thank you for challenging me to reach higher and for your unwavering support throughout. This dissertation would not have been possible without your mentorship. To the courageous and resilient mothers who participated in this study. Your stories, experiences, and insights have been the heart and soul of this research. Thank you for trusting me with your narratives. This paper is to advocate for you and all the mothers who fight every day to create a better future for themselves and their children.

## ABSTRACT

In South Africa, women are a minority of the prison population, but their numbers have significantly increased since 2000, with many being mothers. Despite this rise, the experiences of incarcerated women are under-researched and misrepresented, limiting the knowledge and understanding of these women's narratives of their incarceration and the situations that landed them there. Using an intersectional feminist framework and semi-structured interviews, this study explored how 18 incarcerated mothers in the Western Cape conceptualise and experience motherhood before, during, and after incarceration. The findings of this paper, focus on women, especially mothers, who have been incarcerated, the circumstances which led them to be imprisoned, their family dynamics and their hopes and expectations for their release. Also highlighting the negative impact of South Africa's unequal socio-economic landscape on mothering practices and the increase in criminal behaviour. By challenging patriarchal ideologies and focusing on the voices of participants, this research aims to inform policy and practice makers on how to better support previously incarcerated mothers by revising or creating new frameworks or policies, which will contribute to opening broader discussions on South African mothers who offend. In-prison programmes should be implemented for incarcerated mothers and their families to assist them with supporting one another by focusing on family involvement and support. These programmes should aim to help families cope with having a loved one incarcerated but also to assist in how best to reintegrate the imprisoned woman back into society and back into the family dynamic.

*Keywords:* Incarceration, intersectional feminism, motherhood, qualitative research

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

As of March 2023, South Africa's prison population is 157,056 prisoners, with women accounting for a small minority at around 4,649 (3%), of which an estimated 75% are mothers (World Prison Brief, 2023; Department of Correctional Services, 2023). Although women account for only 7% of the global prison population, their numbers have surged by 60% since 2000 (World Prison Brief, 2023; Penal Reform International, 2023). Despite this rise, the experiences of incarcerated women and mothers are under-researched and poorly represented, which suggests that their narratives are not as important to study (Parry, 2018).

Despite the advocacy of numerous feminist scholars for women's rights to define motherhood on their own terms, this concept of defining motherhood has yet to be fully realised in society. This is because society, in general, has been influenced by history and predetermined social norms that the idea of motherhood does not allow for individual women to define their own understanding of motherhood based on their subjective experiences and personal standards and are judged if these standards deviate from the preconceived "good" mother ideologies that reinforce the notion of caregiving and domesticity (Hays, 1998, as cited in Williamson, Wagstaff, Goodwin & Smith, 2023). These notions keep women subjugated to roles of subservience and caretaking.

Using the intersectional feminist framework in deconstructing socio-cultural and patriarchal ideologies of motherhood, we can try to understand and comprehend the possible failures to account for the diverse and comparatively different realities of South African offending mothers (Wambui, 2013).

Statistics South Africa (2023) reports that as many as 42% of households in South Africa are headed by single mothers. Within these households, 43.4% of children live solely with their mothers, often without the financial support of their fathers, resulting in the matriarchs having to carry the "burden" of raising children alone. Understandably, most crimes that women are convicted of are non-violent and include fraud, shoplifting, petty theft, and drug offences. These are often economic crimes and are influenced by poor access to financial resources (Agboola & Rabe, 2018). Considering

that the 35.5% of women who are employed, earn 30% less than men and only 50% of fathers provide financial assistance (Statistics South Africa, 2023), it is understandable that this only exacerbates the difficulties faced by female-headed households in providing for their children. Given these statistics, households headed by single mothers are more likely to be living in poverty compared to households with two sources of income (Teichmann, 2024).

It is hoped that this research will allow for a gender-sensitive analysis of the lived experiences of mothers before, during and after incarceration, and includes how they navigated the tension between the highly debated and ideologically charged experience of motherhood (Suter et al., 2015). This understanding enables us to gain important knowledge of mothers' needs and experiences before, during, and after their incarceration. Furthermore, this research study serves as a platform through which previously incarcerated mothers can bring to light their narratives by using their own voices. It is hoped that this will, in turn, increase the awareness of female criminality and also assist in closing the gap in research.

### **Rationale**

This study fills the significant gap in the literature (noted above) by examining the lived experiences of motherhood among previously incarcerated women in the Western Cape. By using qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews, the research will provide a nuanced understanding of how incarceration shapes the mothering experiences of these women before, during, and after imprisonment. The theoretical framework of feminism guides the study, allowing for a critical analysis of the construction of motherhood and the implications for incarcerated women. The findings of the study will contribute significantly to South African research in psychology and feminist literature, that can offer insights, can inform policy, practice, and advocacy efforts aimed at supporting previously incarcerated mothers. By amplifying the voices and experiences of previously incarcerated women, this study aims to foster greater awareness and empathy for a marginalised population, which is often overlooked in both the academic discourse and public policy.

## Research questions

### *The study aims to answer:*

1. *How do previously incarcerated mothers in the Western Cape construct and experience motherhood before, during, and after their imprisonment?*

The following sub-questions were central to the study:

- 1.1. How do previously incarcerated women experience motherhood before, during, and after imprisonment?
- 1.2. How does incarceration shape mothering during and after imprisonment?
- 1.3. What parenting challenges do mothers experience during and after incarceration?

In an effort to answer these questions, this study recruited 18 previously incarcerated mothers to participate in semi-structured interviews that explored a reflexive thematic analysis of interview data revealing two main themes: 1) The conceptualisation of motherhood before and after incarceration; and 2) The factors that shape the experiences of motherhood during and after incarceration.

## Outline of Dissertation

The first chapter provides an introduction to the study by contextualising and providing a rationale for the research. The second chapter, which is the literature review, explores the existing studies on mothers and motherhood which also examines the intersection of motherhood with potential criminal behaviour and goes in-depth into the possible challenges and experiences of motherhood during incarceration. Furthermore, it discusses motherhood post-incarceration in the South African context, while focusing on the complexities of reintegration into motherhood and the role of support networks. The Theoretical Framework in this chapter establishes the theoretical

underpinnings of the study and emphasises feminist perspectives to challenge societal norms and expectations associated with motherhood.

In the third chapter, the methods used to answer the research questions are outlined, including, the research design, participant selection, data collection methods and the data analysis procedures used in the study. It addresses ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, and participant risks, while also reflecting on the researcher's reflexivity and positionality in the study.

Chapter four presents the study's findings and discussion. It examines societal expectations of mothers and their impact, explores evolving perceptions of 'good' mothers before and after incarceration, and identifies factors that shape mothering experiences, including the myth of maternal instinct, and challenges faced during and after incarceration.

The concluding chapter summarises the key findings of the study, acknowledges its limitations, and offers practical recommendations for policy, practice, and further research. It concludes by emphasising the significance of understanding and supporting previously incarcerated mothers in South Africa and aims to contribute to both academic discourse and societal efforts to achieve equity and justice for all mothers.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

While there is a significant body of research on motherhood, there is a limited amount of South African feminist research on mothers who have been imprisoned. In the literature, there is a dominant discourse on motherhood that is shaped by societal expectations and traditional notions of domesticity, where women are categorised as caregivers, homemakers and the ones responsible for raising children and other domestic responsibilities. However, this idea overlooks and neglects the intersectionality of the experiences of previously incarcerated mothers. It does not include, or presume a previously incarcerated woman is capable or knowledgeable of this stereotypical domesticated role as a mother. Accordingly, this chapter provides a critical review of existing research and seeks to identify the gaps concerning the social construction of motherhood, as well as the patriarchal discourses that focus on women's experiences of motherhood during and after incarceration. I start by introducing intersectional feminism as the theoretical framework since it underpins my review of the literature in addition to the study's methods and my interpretation of the data.

### **A feminist critique of patriarchal discourses of motherhood**

According to Goodwin and Huppatz (2010), gender stereotypes continue to influence society's beliefs about gender roles. Societal expectations of these roles, in particular the notion that women should be primary caregivers and nurturers of children, lead to the stigmatisation of women who deviate from these roles. These women are often labelled as bad mothers (Lewis & Sommervold, 2015). The social stigmatisation and "self-imposed punishment" such as internalised shame and guilt that mothers experience stem from societal gender norms and expectations, which dictate that women should prioritise their roles as mothers above all else (Karveli et al., 2012, p. 42).

In the context of women in prison, the feminist critique, which describes women who support other women and mothers, exposes how traditional patriarchal discourses not only limit women's opportunities but contribute to their social stigmatisation and marginalisation. By challenging these discourses and advocating for gender equality, feminists seek to empower women

and dismantle the oppressive structures that perpetuate gender stereotypes and inequality (Moore, 2017).

Since the First Women's Rights Movement/Convention in 1848, which was organised by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott in Seneca Falls, motherhood has been a minefield for feminism to navigate. Feminist activists have fought for reproductive rights, social, political, and economic equality, and sexual liberation, which challenged sexist and patriarchal discrimination (Knowles & Cole, 1990). It was thought that becoming a mother was the ultimate betrayal of liberating oneself (Denny, 1994). Since the 19th century, there have been four waves of feminist movements. Activists stressed the unity of women and took the initiative to fight back against oppressive patriarchal forces collectively. Over three decades, gender activists have fought to end gender discrimination and achieve equality in all spheres of society (Goodwin & Huppatz, 2010).

First-wave feminists fought for equal opportunities, employment rights, and enfranchisement and challenged domesticity. Activists and authors played a significant role in women's liberation. Feminists Knowles and Cole (1990) argued that motherhood was a patriarchal and oppressive weapon that tied women to domesticity, leaving them unable to liberate themselves. Despite the various feminist accomplishments in the first wave, there were many rights women were still denied. The second wave of feminism comprised of many different movements, but their objective was the same. Feminists fought for sexual liberation, equal pay, access to the workplace, freedom of choice, the decision over one's body and the legalisation of abortion (Kline 2010). Radical feminists wanted to overthrow the patriarchy, believing it to be the seed of oppression. One of these radicals was Firestone (1970), who protested that women would only be emancipated when "domestic work no longer claims anything but an insignificant amount of her time." (p. 40). Firestone believed maternity was the fundamental difference between males and females and that the only way to "level the playing field" was by biologically abolishing motherhood. The thought of pregnancy disgusted her, so she proposed growing babies in artificial wombs (Denny, 1994). Simone de Beauvoir (1974) shares the opinion that the social constructs of domesticity and motherhood aid the

patriarchal oppression of women (O'Reilly, 2019). However, unlike Firestone, she accepted motherhood as a critical position for women but advocated that mothers challenge and scrutinise these radical patriarchal ideologies deeply ingrained in society. In the mid-90s the third wave of feminism began. It was influenced by post-colonial and post-modern thinking. Many 'universal womanhood' notions were challenged during this wave, such as body, gender, sexuality and heteronormativity (Rampton, 2008). The still-emerging fourth wave focuses on the empowerment of women whilst centring intersectionality. This wave promotes the use of social media to mobilise and empower women against harassment, unjust power relations and bodily autonomy (Rampton, 2008).

When women choose motherhood over the workforce, the sisterhood of feminism no longer values mothers as contributors to the movement. The very same feminists who fought for women to have their voices heard now try to control and limit other women's choices. Feminists embody the very thing they tried to eradicate, oppression. Not all women want to be "liberated" from motherhood (Steen, 2020, p.1). Albeit motherhood encompasses unrelenting contributions and sacrifices.

Patriarchal discourses where a male dominant society has been the standard for centuries have long been criticised with the intention of disrupting dominant discourses of mothers, motherhood, and mothering. However, even after centuries of fighting for equality, liberation, and free choice, women remain marginalised for not living up to the idealisation of motherhood. This continuous fight for equality is illustrated in the expectations that society has of mothers (Agboola, 2014).

### ***Societal expectations of motherhood***

According to Roberts (1993), from the moment women are born they find themselves situated in the social landscape that will one day expect them to be mothers. Traditionally, girls' toys (e.g. cooking sets, doll houses, shops) are gendered toys that align with traditional expectations (Roberts, 1993). In this way, for many girls, becoming a woman is conflated with being a mother. By extension, the role of 'motherhood' is socially constructed and determined by the dominant discourses reflected in the media and popular culture about womanhood and mothering (Seidel, 2013). Valorised social constructions of motherhood leave women open to judgment and criticism. According to Connolly (2002, p. 282), mothers are always striving to embody the "good" mother, which includes protecting, conserving, and facilitating children's growth and development. Williamson et al. (2023) state that the archetypal mother is characterised by her nurturing, domestic, and self-sacrificing qualities. According to Goodwin and Huppertz (2010), women's identities are tied to child-raising and nurturing, in an attempt to make them bear children. In addition, motherhood is constructed as being an institution which is deeply embedded in a societal framework, which O'Reilly (2019) claims is a male-defined site of oppression. The perceived submissive "nature" associated with this institution sets and sustains a standard to which all women are held. Mothers who embody patriarchal norms of womanhood, like passivity, domesticity, and subservience, are afforded recognition and praise (Boyd, 2013). Motherhood is often assumed to be an experience that comes 'naturally' to women because it is supposedly what they desire, as it embodies femininity (Maher & Saugeres, 2007). So, for many women, aspects of their identity are tied up with the experience of being mothers (Baldwin, 2015). Therefore, women who do not have children or are unsure about having children are often labelled as "emotionally disturbed". Falling short of said standards leads to rejection and shaming of these women (Lewis & Sommervold, 2015). Understandably, the process of women defining themselves as "good" mothers and incorporating motherhood into their identity often involves shuffling with ideals that are juxtaposed with the reality of mothering (Laney et al., 2015). Hays (1998) in Johnston and Swanson (2006), explains that the notion of a good mother is

one of a woman who dedicates all her time to her children, and who is physically, intellectually, emotionally and psychologically all-giving and present. She is expected to sacrifice herself to the demands of this role (Connolly, 2002).

As previously mentioned, mothering discourses place women under immense pressure to conform to specific standards. When women, particularly those who are vulnerable and underprivileged, do not achieve these standards, they are labelled as "bad" or "deviant" (Roberts, 1993). These women who are in vulnerable situations have a higher risk of falling into criminal behaviour. Unsurprisingly, formerly incarcerated mothers are frequently shunned as offenders and labelled as bad mothers who ignore and neglect their children (Sutherland, 2010, p. 311). Building on the discussion of societal labelling, the next section will explore how the stigma of being labelled a 'lawbreaker' deeply affects the maternal identities of formerly incarcerated mothers. This label often exacerbates feelings of guilt and shame, as these women struggle to reconcile their actions with societal expectations of 'good' motherhood (Aiello & Mc Queeney, 2016).

**Motherhood and Crime.** Historically, the Western archetype of the mother as passive, financially dependent, and law-abiding further stereotypes offending mothers as indifferent and unfit (Quadrelli, 2003). Aiello and McQueeney (2016) suggest that convicted mothers suffer from a "spoiled identity," a term coined by Goffman (1963). As a result, idealised representations of motherhood lead to harsher judgment and marginalisation of incarcerated mothers compared to their male counterparts (Sutherland, 2010). While the construction of a mother being nurturing, affectionate, and self-sacrificing, served as the "ideal" representation of mothers, it also perpetuated unrealistic expectations for women (Batalha et al., 2023). Deeply entrenched cultural stereotypes of womanhood and femininity often influence women's treatment by various societal institutions (Gilbert, 2002). These socially constructed ideals have a particularly pervasive influence on how the criminal justice system deals with and punishes women who have committed crimes. Therefore, the crime of such women is not just a transgression of the legal system but goes against societal expectations (Gilbert, 2002). This discrepancy is significantly magnified and aggravated for

women who are mothers. Mothers are often harshly judged for their deviation from the glorified ideals of being a good mother, usually in a way that deprives them of an understanding of their actions and motivations (Singh, 2017).

Incarcerated mothers often feel invisible to society and may see themselves as being “throwaway mothers” (Bridges, 2013). The stigma associated with committing a crime and being incarcerated affects how women are perceived (Sleed et al., 2013). According to Sharpe (2015), long after a mother has left her life of crime behind her, she will continue to be stigmatised as being “maternally deficient.”

Women are more frequently convicted for low-level, non-violent crimes such as drug-related offences, fraud, theft, driving under the influence, and sex work (Quadrelli, 2003). These are typically crimes that are related to financial hardship and in response to multiple socio-economic pressures that women in poverty often face. Prior to incarceration, some mothers may have battled with drug addiction, domestic abuse, mental illness and providing for their children (Marcus-Mendoza, 2004). The intersection of gender, race and socio-economic inequalities contributes significantly to shaping this criminal activity (Agboola & Rabe, 2018). Mothers from impoverished communities experience more challenging and stressful role demands compared to mothers who have access to resources and the financial means to parent their children. Kennedy (2012) suggested that some impoverished women who commit crimes do so to provide for their children. However, because these same women do not meet the ideals of being a ‘good’ mother by committing a crime, they are deemed to be unfit. And yet, some incarcerated mothers do justify their actions as a means to support their children. This, therefore, illustrates their commitment and devotion to the well-being of their children (Aiello & McQueeney, 2016).

A researcher who has greatly contributed to the study of maternal incarceration is criminologist Lucy Baldwin. Much of her work in the United Kingdom aims to positively change the way women and families are treated in social and criminal justice. Her research has always emphasised how the prison environment challenges the mothering identity and the responsibilities

of incarcerated women as mothers (Baldwin, 2017). The basis of Baldwin's work is focused on disrupting the preconceived notion society has constructed about women being intrinsically nurturing, passive and giving (Binning, 2015, as cited in Baldwin, 2017). These mothering ideologies and expectations result in much harsher societal scrutiny when a woman offends. This bias also affects the outcome of a woman offender's sentence, especially if she is a mother. Women are often given lengthier sentences if they are mothers, while men are not held to such a high moral standard (Binning, 2015, as cited in Baldwin, 2017). This can significantly affect a female offender's mental health and can contribute to the onset of mental illness while they are incarcerated. One of Baldwin's (2015) case studies involved a mother who had stolen a television set and was given a lengthy sentence by the judge because he believed that "she is supposed to be a role model for her son, she should have reported the items stolen immediately and informed the police." Baldwin reports that this suggests a judicial bias towards mothers. Most incarcerated mothers interviewed in Baldwin's studies are single mothers who will probably never see their children again as a result of their custodial sentence (Binning, 2015). Mahoney (1991, as cited in Baldwin, 2015) attempted to remedy this by suggesting that, instead of handing out short custodial sentences for non-violent crimes, women who commit these crimes should be placed in community support centres that focus specifically on rehabilitation and recidivism.

Building on this perspective, the next section will delve into the concept of mothering whilst in prison. Examining how structural barriers and incarceration impact mothering practices.

## **Motherhood During Incarceration**

Studies conducted in South Africa (Artz & Hoffman-Wanderer, 2017; Parry, 2018; Easterling et al., 201) and the US (Koons-Witt et al., 2021; Walmsley, 2017) have shown that imprisoned mothers are predominantly single mothers from impoverished backgrounds, with limited education, experience of abuse, and assume the role of both primary caregiver and breadwinner. The unfavourable socio-economic circumstances coupled with incarceration often intensify the challenges associated with parental duties.

As incarcerated mothers serve their prison sentences, they are often deprived of the physical opportunity to be a parent. The impossibility of physical mothering drives incarcerated women to either redefine or delegate their mothering roles and responsibilities to family members (Sibisi, Shezi, & Dlamini, 2023). These responsibilities include taking children to school, attending essential functions and events, and being physically present in the home. Women who are incarcerated are forced to find alternatives to physical aspects of motherhood, which is made increasingly difficult by institutional barriers, where prisons have made it exceedingly more difficult for mothers to have access to their children.

Highlighted by South African authors Masekoameng, Parry, and Fourie (2023), is that children whose mothers are unable to provide as a caregiver during her incarceration are often placed in the care of extended family members. On one hand, this potentially increases the risk of permanently losing their custodial rights to their children and limits their contact. On the other hand, it can lessen the economic and emotional burden on incarcerated mothers. Makiwane and Kaunda (2018) argue that relying on extended family can also negatively impact the economic status and health and well-being of the family members who take on the responsibility of caring for these children. However, it is sometimes the only choice that incarcerated mothers have because of the lack of an institutionalised social security system.

Incarceration poses significant challenges to mothers maintaining relationships with their families, and in particular, their children (Shisana, Rice, Zungu, & Zuma, 2010). Their removal from

daily family life causes a dramatic loss of power over their lives and impacts their involvement in their children's lives (Clement, 1993). This inability to fulfil mothering "duties" often leads to increased feelings of guilt and frustration, which only exacerbates the already difficult task of mothering (Clement, 1993; Snyder et al., 2002). The opportunity to form, develop and maintain integral emotional and psychological bonds with their children is also taken away from incarcerated mothers. Women are no longer present as instructional guides, sources of encouragement, advice and comfort givers for their children.

Macquet (2014) found that the South African prison environment is not conducive to meaningful conversations or interactions between mothers and their children, structural barriers in the prison system limit the nurturing of interpersonal relationships. Consequently, emotional support for children during a prison sentence is primarily limited to telephonic communication, letter writing, and facilitated visits. The emotional toll of separation and the inability to actively mother one's child are profound and enduring issues (Comack, 1993; Hutton, 2016).

Despite a continually increasing prison population, women are still a minority of this population. As a result, there are significantly fewer prison facilities devoted exclusively to women. This means that imprisoned mothers are often required to serve their sentences in prisons far from their homes and children (Mignon & Randsford, 2012). This results in logistical difficulties such as long journeys, increased travel costs for the family visiting the mother in prison, and even the inability to visit. Written letters present the option of lengthier and more meaningful communication and can be used by the imprisoned mother to fulfil her emotional interactions, despite the physical barriers presented by her imprisonment (Mignon & Randsford, 2012). According to Hutton (2016) and Luyt (2008), for the imprisoned mother, receiving visits from her children and other loved ones can be a source of emotional and psychological relief and respite from the harsh prison environment.

Unfortunately, mothers' problems do not end with their release from prison and reintegration into society; they must now confront the issue of rekindling maternal and familial bonds after a long separation. Furthermore, they are expected to resume their position as carers immediately, with or without support networks, regardless of income or status of employment. South African authors (Aiello & McQueeney, 2016; Garcia, 2016) note the prevalent assumption that once a crime is committed, the perpetrator is resigned to a life of delinquency and criminality, even after serving prison time. While this is only an assumption, the stigma of being a jailed mother extends far beyond the prison walls, as seen in the next section.

### **Motherhood post-incarceration**

For mothers who have been in prison for a relatively long time, reintegrating into family life is an enormous task. In many cases, mothers released from prison must try to navigate relationships with their children (Garcia, 2016). Keeping in mind that sometimes children extricate themselves from the mother-child relationship or are unwilling to reestablish a connection with their mother. According to Ferraro (2006), women usually leave their children in the care of female relatives instead of a male partner while they are imprisoned. This means that the mother's role as caregiver is often assumed by another female relative, who becomes the proxy mother (Masekoameng et al., 2023). This can be a challenge when the mother attempts to reassume her role as the primary caregiver. The reacceptance of the previously incarcerated mother back into the social fold acts as a social anchor, which provides her with stability and support (Davis et al., 2012). However, mothers who have little to no social support after their imprisonment are at a higher risk of reoffending and being forced back into the criminal justice system. Without a social network and financial support, these women may feel stigmatised and further socially ostracised and are likely to return to destructive behaviour and criminality (Sufrin, 2018).

Within the South African context, Gobena, Hean, Heaslip, and Studsrød (2022) found that post-release is a time when mothers often strive to reclaim their role as mothers and reinsert themselves back into their family dynamics and routines. However, they are often met with

significant challenges, due to lack of familial support. The re-entry process is further complicated by limited job skills, difficulties in securing employment, and inadequate housing options. These challenges make it particularly difficult for mothers to fulfil 'maternal' responsibilities, affecting not only themselves but also their families. This is especially true for mothers who were primary caregivers before their incarceration (Artz & Rotmann, 2015).

A study by another South African author, Singh (2017), found that offending mothers are often viewed as pariahs who, after their release, face stigmatisation and negative societal attitudes that further marginalised them. The negative perceptions and stigma associated with being a former inmate exacerbate the already tumultuous nature of reintegration. Therefore, it seems clear that life with a criminal record as a woman comes with significant challenges.

As previously mentioned, released criminals face difficulties in adjusting due to limited financial and material resources. This lack of means further worsens their ability to cope with the changes they encounter (Chikadzi, 2017). Successful reintegration in this context means focusing on goals like reunification with children, reducing substance abuse, and avoiding harm or further imprisonment (Bulmiller, 2013).

In her research, Parry (2018) states that ex-offenders may find it exceedingly challenging to adapt to life outside prison, especially when they lack cohesive support in their community, which often drives women into cycles of dependency and serial incarceration. However, women who receive support from their families and communities are less likely to reoffend, but this is not always the case according to Carlton and Segrave (2016). A robust support system in the form of family and friends, or other community members such as religious congregations and support groups, often ensures that mothers have the necessary material and emotional resources to rebuild their lives and those of their children (Thurber, 1998).

Van Wyk (2014) observed that employment opportunities play a vital role in facilitating reintegration and reducing recidivism, meaning that societal reluctance to offer second chances exacerbates the cycle of crime. As previously mentioned, ex-offenders face considerable

stigmatisation because of their criminal record and, as a result, they are often prevented from accessing specific opportunities in society such as employment, housing and other resources and services, which can lead to difficulties for them to re-enter society. Mpuang (2001), in her study regarding the reintegration of offenders, posits that most offenders in South Africa are denied these opportunities, which significantly impacts previously incarcerated mothers' economic viability. This in turn makes their survival and ability to thrive increasingly difficult, as they are left unable to make a living for themselves and their children. For many, this may drive women towards financially motivated criminality and eventual reincarceration (Maidment, 2006). Therefore, having access to adequate material, financial, social, and emotional resources is one of the critical components in terms of increasing successful reintegration and decreasing recidivism. Ultimately, without adequate support and opportunities for reintegration, ex-offenders may find themselves trapped in circumstances that fuel future criminal behaviour, perpetuating cycles of incarceration and disadvantage (Adams et al., 2016).

The aim of this contemporary feminist discourse is to understand and examine how the complex relationship between social factors like socio-economic status, race, class, gender, and sexuality intersects with wider historical and current systems of oppression (Carastathis, 2014). A feminist discourse was used to understand and analyse the disproportionate ways the South African systems of oppression and inequality serve to construct the multiple identities, social locations, and experiences of unequal power dynamics among participants (Cseby, 2023).

This framework was fitting because it centred on and represented the diverse voices of participants and challenged prescribed gender roles that perpetuate gender inequality. This ensured that my research was inclusive. Furthermore, as an approach, it encourages the creation of more equitable support systems to improve sociopolitical positions (Kiguwa, 2019).

The literature review highlighted some of the findings in existing studies, the intersection of mothering and crime. It explored the challenges of mothering before, during and after incarceration in South Africa, emphasising institutional barriers and support networks that are crucial for

reintegration. The review also established the theoretical framework rooted in feminist perspectives to challenge traditional norms associated with motherhood. The next chapter reviews in detail the research methodology that was used in the study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research draws on intersectional feminism, a theory that originated in the 1980s within feminist scholarship (Crenshaw, 1989). The intersectional feminist principles that informed this research were: inclusiveness and empowerment; reflexivity and power dynamics; co-construction of knowledge; and challenging traditional epistemologies (McCormick, 2012). By prioritising the voices of participants, I sought to capture and recognise their diverse and complex realities. Their first-hand accounts, which are often overlooked or misrepresented by others, such as those in a hierarchy position or those who are not educated on the topic of mothers and how they handle their incarceration along with their motherly duties, challenged dominant narratives. The intersectional feminist framework that guided this study allowed for a more nuanced understanding of motherhood, which can enrich both academic discourses and policymaking by educating those policymakers on motherhood and incarceration, as well as contributing to the larger conversation about female offending and motherhood. Throughout the research process, I drew on this feminist framework, which informed every part of the study from the formulation of research questions, methodology, ethics, to data analysis (Agboola, 2018).

A review and critique of existing literature indicated that mothers' experiences are frequently overlooked, while those that are reported on, produce socially constructed stereotypes and subservient kinds of knowledge that perpetuate patriarchal thinking (Agboola, 2018). Following on from this is an examination of how feminism is a reaction to patriarchal discourses that continue to influence the experiences of mothers and a critical exploration of the tension between being labelled a 'good' mother or an 'offending' mother.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Outlined in this chapter are the research methods that were utilised to carry out this study. The research design that was chosen for the purpose of this study is described, and the reason for this choice is explained. A brief overview of participant demographics is provided as well as the criteria for inclusion and how participants were sampled. In addition, the research instrument used for data collection is described, along with the procedures followed to conduct the study. Methods of data analysis are also described. Finally, the ethical considerations that were attended to during the research process are also discussed.

### **Research Design**

Qualitative methods were used to provide an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and the meaning they attached to their lives. The flexibility of qualitative research allowed for the exploration of emerging themes and nuances. Additionally, qualitative approaches were effective in capturing the context-specific factors and intersecting issues (such as race, class, and gender) that influenced the experiences of formerly incarcerated mothers in a South African context. This approach allowed women to narrate their experiences in their own words and aligned with the feminist approach of centring their voices (Parry, 2018). The qualitative research was particularly adept at exploring complex, multifaceted issues and understanding the interplay of various factors that affected individuals' lives, which was essential for addressing the intersectional challenges faced by the participants (Kielmann et al., 2012).

### **Population and Sampling**

As cited in World Prison Brief (2023) and Department of Correctional Services Annual Report (2023), there are currently an estimated 4649 incarcerated women in South Africa (1958 sentenced: 577 not sentenced). The Western Cape DCS houses approximately 1,164 of these women (577 sentenced and 586, not sentenced). As of 2014, there are 243 correctional facilities in South Africa; eight of these are "female-only" facilities, while 129 are for men only, of which 91 facilities have a wing where women are housed separately (Department of Correctional Services Annual Report,

2014). Given these statistics, the general population of previously incarcerated mothers are limited in size and not readily accessible. Therefore, purposive sampling (a non-random sampling technique) was used to “intentionally” select participants for this study (Patton, 2002); while snowball sampling was used to expand the sample size through participant referrals. In order to participate in this study, women had to meet the following criteria: 1) be aged 18 years or older, 2) have been imprisoned within the past five years, and 3) have had children before or during incarceration. A sample of 18 previously incarcerated mothers who met this criteria were recruited to participate in this study.

### **Recruitment and Study Procedures**

As the researcher, I sent an email containing the research advertisement (Appendix C) to a Western Cape non-governmental organisation (NGO) that assists previously incarcerated mothers and women with their restorative and reintegration processes. The NGO then forwarded the research advertisement via email to previously incarcerated women affiliated with their organisation, and posted the advertisement to their online message boards. 18 women wanted to participate in the study so they sent a WhatsApp message, expressing their interest. The participants and I then arranged a time and date to conduct the online interviews. The high number of COVID-19 cases at the time made it unsafe for participants and me as the interviewer to meet in person (April 2020). Ongoing connectivity issues and financial constraints led to 17 interviews being conducted using audio only, without video. All participants received the consent form (Appendix B) digitally to review, sign, and return to the researcher before the interview. One participant gave written consent and the remaining participants gave their verbal consent which was recorded. Interviews ranged in length from twenty minutes to two hours. At the end of the interviews, as the researcher, I debriefed each participant and gave them the opportunity to provide feedback on the interview experience.

## Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews guided by an interview schedule was used to collect data (Appendix E). This approach was appropriate because of the limited knowledge that exists on this research topic. An in-depth understanding was therefore needed from participants. Semi-structured interviews include open-ended questions, which allowed the researcher greater flexibility, enabling the emergence of new ideas during the interview. Despite this flexibility, I, as the interviewer still had questions that were informed by the aim of the study, which were explored during the interview (Robinson, 2015; Howitt & Cramer, 2016).

## Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the data collected in this study. This is described as a method for identifying themes in the data and analysing, interpreting and reporting on them to answer the research questions. Transcribed data was coded using NVivo, generating and expanding upon themes. Mortensen (2020), built on the six steps Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend when thematically analysing data :

*1. Familiarisation.* I familiarised myself with the data collected by going through the notes taken during and after the interviews, as well as the audio recordings. The raw data was then transcribed and reviewed (Mortensen, 2020).

*2. Assigning preliminary codes.* The data was assigned codes which were used to briefly describe the spoken dialogue in the interview(s). It helped to organise the data into meaningful groups (Mortensen, 2020).

*3. Searching for patterns or themes in the codes.* As the researcher, I sorted codes into themes. The themes were broad and were used to interpret the data collected. The codes which had extracts were then analysed and collated into themes. Creating a table in Microsoft Word that visually illustrates codes, themes, subthemes, and excerpts helped identify the essential themes and disregard the irrelevant ones (Mortensen, 2020).

*4. Reviewing themes.* The themes identified in Step 3 were then reviewed and refined. My supervisors checked/ reviewed these themes. In addition, as the researcher, I allowed some time to pass before re-checking these themes with a more objective view. All the extracts and related codes were re-analysed to check whether they supported the theme, contradicted it, or overlapped with other themes. If the themes became too broad, they were split into two or merged with an existing theme that was more suitable. Once the set of themes was coherent, the process was repeated across the entire data set (Mortensen, 2020).

*5. Defining and naming themes.* As the researcher, I named and described all the themes uncovered. The names of the themes were descriptive and interesting, therefore allowing the researcher to relate a coherent story (Mortensen, 2020).

*6. Producing the report.* This involves a write-up of the results, as per this thesis.

I chose reflexive thematic analysis because it was compatible with a wide range of theoretical approaches grounded in feminism, and therefore consistent with the methodological framework of intersectional feminism.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical clearance was obtained from the UCT Committee (Appendix E). Informed consent was obtained by thoroughly explaining the study's purpose, nature, and participant roles, ensuring that participants fully understood before agreeing to participate. While the participants' identities were known to me, the confidentiality of their participation in the study was ensured by anonymity through the use of pseudonyms and by removing any identifying information from the transcribed data.

***Informed Consent and the Right to Withdraw***

The consent form (Appendix B) was emailed to participants before the interview. On the day of the interview, both parties verbally reviewed the form together and all questions and concerns were addressed. The consent form outlined the conditions of participation, clarified that participation was voluntary, and assured that choosing not to participate would bear no negative consequences. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage, and if they chose to withdraw, data collected and recorded would either be destroyed or returned to them (Quadrelli, 2003).

***Confidentiality and Privacy***

To protect the identity of the participants, pseudonyms were assigned to them. The audio-recorded interviews and transcriptions were securely stored in a password-protected, encrypted file on a password-protected computer, which nobody but me had access to. All participants were made aware of their right to review the transcribed interview data and informed how the data was going to be used. After five years, all remaining research data will be destroyed.

***Risks to Participants***

Some of the issues covered in the interview were sensitive and had the potential to cause the participants emotional distress. During debriefing, participants were asked to reflect and give feedback on the interview process, such as what feelings specific questions might have provoked. As the researcher, I provided details of free counselling services and helplines and offered to make appointments for participants if necessary (Appendix D).

***Potential Benefits and Remuneration***

Participants were not remunerated for participation, but they were given a R150 grocery store voucher as a token of appreciation for their time and one gigabyte of data to carry out the remote interview.

***Reflexivity and Positionality***

Understanding my privileged position as a white, middle-class woman, who is not a mother, nor have I been incarcerated, underscored the importance of inclusivity and accurate representation of the participants' voices. It prompted me to actively seek out and include diverse perspectives, ensuring that the research findings genuinely reflected the participants' experiences. Reflecting on my positionality encouraged ongoing ethical reflexivity throughout the research process. This means continuously questioning and adjusting my approach to ensure it aligns with ethical principles and respects the dignity and autonomy of the participants. Awareness of my positionality helped in minimising potential harm by ensuring that the research process was conducted in a manner that was respectful, non-exploitative, and supportive of the participants' well-being. I kept a journal detailing my experience of the interviews and made notes on the feedback I received from participants about their interview experiences. Exchanging emails and having Zoom calls with my supervisor created self-awareness, which helped situate me in the research process (Patnaik, 2013).

This chapter described the research methodology used for this study, including the research design, population and sampling, study procedures, participant demographics, data collection and analysis, and various issues associated with ethical considerations. Emphasis was placed on the collaborative relationship between researcher and participant to foster a space for participants to reveal their lived realities (Parry, 2018). The next chapter presents the analysed data with a discussion of the findings.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the findings of the research, which examined women's experiences of motherhood before, during, and after incarceration.

### Participant Demographics

Participant demographics including age, number of children, employment status, and marital status are described in Table 1. The average age of participants was 46. Each participant had between one and five children. After their release, only 11 of the 18 participants were able to find employment. Additionally, before incarceration, 83% of participants were partnered (engaged/married), while 17% were single. However, after incarceration, only 39% were still partnered, and 61% were single (divorced/separated/widowed). Lastly, most participants served an average prison sentence of four years, mostly for economic crimes such as fraud, shoplifting, and theft.

**Table 1**

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Number of children	Employment status	Relationship status
Bev	50	4	Unemployed	Divorced
Britt	n/a	5	Unemployed	Divorced
Cara	51	2	Employed	Divorced
Jess	42	1	Unemployed	Divorced
Jill	64	2	Self-employed	Married
Lee	44	2	Employed	Separated

Mara	46	4	Employed	Divorced
Mary	42	1	Employed	Married
Mel	54	1	Unemployed	Married
Milly	39	2	Voluntary work	Married
Nina	46	3	Employed	Separated
Nonhle	37	2	Unemployed	Widowed
Sally	38	2	Unemployed	Married
Sarah	n/a	1	Employed	Separated
Shana	n/a	2	Unemployed	Married
Sue	49	3	Employed	Divorced
Terry	n/a	2	Self-employed	Separated
Tina	42	2	Voluntary work	Married

Through Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, the themes presented in Table 2 were identified.

**Table 2**

Overview of themes and subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
1. The definition of motherhood	1.1. The impact of societal expectations on mothers 1.2. Evolving perceptions of a 'good mother' before and after incarceration
2. The factors that shape the experiences of motherhood	2.1. The myth of maternal instinct and the experience of being mothered 2.2. The challenges of mothering 2.2.1. During incarceration (inductive and deductive analysis used) 2.2.2. After incarceration (inductive and deductive analysis used)

## **The Definition of Motherhood**

The definition of motherhood refers to a mother's process of understanding the meaning of gender roles/norms and societal expectations assigned to mothers. According to Ture (2015) and the participants in this study, the responsibilities assigned to mothers include being able to provide physical and psychological care for their children, which by extension includes domestic responsibilities. Within this theme, societal expectations of 'good mothers,' personal beliefs and demographic context emerged as significant factors that informed and shaped how participants perceived themselves as mothers and practised mothering. The construct of being a 'good mother' is defined by societal and cultural norms, which pressures mothers to conform to specific standards and ideals. Mothers are judged and, in turn, judge themselves based on these ideals (Sutherland, 2010). Moreover, their conceptualisations, often informed by myths of maternal instinct, changed and evolved as mothers navigated the challenges of their incarceration and reintegration.

### ***The Impact of Societal Expectations on Mothers***

Several participants spoke about their experience of pressure and the stereotypes imposed on women as mothers. For participants, these expectations were rooted in notions of nurturing and domesticity, which were often overwhelming and led to feelings of inadequacy. Participants challenged traditional gender roles and the idealised image of the 'perfect' mother. Furthermore, the tension between societal ideals and mothers' actual experiences was explored, offering a deeper understanding of the complexities of how motherhood is understood. This was seen in an excerpt from an interview with Sally, a soon-to-be mother of two, who had spent four years in jail. In her account, she noted a common societal expectation and stereotype that places the primary responsibility for parenting on women:

*"Women are deemed to be the primary caregivers and the ones solely responsible. I became resentful of being stuck with all the responsibility. I began to resent that part of being a mom, having to always protect the perfect image of a mom." - (Sally, 38)*

Here, Sally seemed to reflect on the consequences of these societal expectations of mothers and her resentment at the fact that as a mother, society expects her—and mothers in general—to be solely responsible for childcare, to embody the ideologically perfect mother, and present herself as a mother in a particular way. According to Wearing (1996), traditional gender norms inform specific roles and responsibilities assigned to women, often including notions of caregiving, nurturing, and domestic responsibilities. Similarly, Forder-Eagles (2016), Hays (1998), and Zhou (2017) refer to these ideologies as a set of social beliefs that outline how mothers should parent their children if they want to be perceived as being good mothers. This “intensive mothering ideology” underscores how maternal practices remain intertwined with broader discourses about motherhood and gender, and are characterised by ideals of selflessness, nurturing unconditional love, and sacrifice for one’s children.

Recognising the problematic nature of this ideology, some participants balked at this notion. Like Sally, Mary also remarked on the impact and consequences that arise from societal expectations of mothers and mothering:

*“There is no such thing as a perfect or good mother, and there never will be. This concept comes from the 50s and is an archetype we must let go of. It is the 21st century, and people are so deluded if they think the housewife with the white picket fence, nurturing mother and breadwinner husband still exists. Every parent messes up but imagine how exhausting it must be to be put on a pedestal with all eyes waiting for you to slip up.” -*

(Mary, 42)

Frizelle and Kell (2009) noted that societal expectations insist that women are solely responsible for their children’s well-being while balancing domestic responsibilities. However, in this excerpt, Mary critiques this stereotype as being outdated. Importantly, Mary seems to recognise the problematic nature and impact these expectations have on women. In doing so, she highlights the pressure for mothers to embody this archetypal ‘good mother’ stereotype and to meet impossibly high standards, which she describes as “exhausting.” This societal ideal perpetuates unrealistic

expectations and contributes to feelings of inadequacy, guilt, and stress among mothers (Meeussen et al., 2018) as reported by Milly:

*“I just feel like society paints an unrealistic picture of women and mothers. We have to live up to these high standards and expectations. When you cannot live up to that high standard, you feel like a failure.” - (Milly, 39)*

In this quote, Milly captured the pressure and psychological toll that the ideology of motherhood can have on women. Milly reported that when mothers cannot meet these high standards and societal expectations of motherhood, a sense of failure can pervade their self-perception. (Liss et al., 2023) noted that the internalisation of unrealistic expectations has made feelings of failure an intrinsic part of motherhood; a claim supported by Brown (2017), who described a mother’s sense of failure as a standard “shame trigger.” The data from this study shows how the emotional burden can be especially pronounced in a society that frequently idealises and romanticises the idea of being a good mother. However, there is also hopefulness in their recognition of these discourses as being problematic, which is an important shift for women.

When woven together, the accounts of participants and the literature shed light on the importance of recognising the unrealistic nature of the above expectations, their effects on mothers, and the necessity for more nuanced and supportive dialogues associated with motherhood. As these narratives unravelled the societal expectations thrust upon mothers, it became evident that the experience of incarceration acted as a profound disruptor, while challenging and reshaping how the participants perceived being a good mother—as evident in the following accounts.

### **The Evolving Perceptions of a ‘Good Mother’ before and after Incarceration**

Most participants in this study spoke about changes they experienced in how they perceived motherhood before and after they were in prison. Having been compelled to relinquish some of their caregiving roles while in prison, most tangibly those that required their physical presence, participants were keen to resume their mothering practices based on their new perception of what constituted ‘good mothering’ to them. It became evident that the impetus behind the participants’

definition was deeply rooted in their commitment to their families and children, alongside the emotional turmoil that stemmed from this separation and subsequent guilt (Whiley, Sayer, & Juanchich, 2021). It is important to note that this does not imply that prison is inherently beneficial for participants. Instead, it underscores how, for some participants, the experience of being incarcerated disrupted, challenged, and reshaped their perception of what, according to them, is a 'good mother' and 'good mothering' practices. According to Khan (2020), people who are incarcerated are primarily responsible for their own change; however, prison environments can, at times, facilitate such transformations, as is seen in Sally's account:

*"Being incarcerated was a very necessary part of my life. It has been both transformative and devastating. It has also been very liberating because I have come to terms with myself and accepted who I am. I feel like I had failed as a child, and I wanted to make up in all the right ways, it was unrealistic. I have taken responsibility for letting my daughter down. The moment I was released, I had an opportunity to be a real mother. I cannot blame being in prison for not being a mother anymore. The onus is now on me to step up."* - (Sally)

Gobena (2022) acknowledged that the experience of being in prison can foster a paradigm shift, such as the reconceptualisation of motherhood. This perception can also be attributed to self-reflection and personal growth undertaken by prisoners while they are incarcerated. Although not explicitly about motherhood, Sally's excerpt sheds light on this. Underscored in her narrative is the introspective journey she embarked on during her five-year incarceration. This process, rooted in self-reflection, holding herself accountable, and learning from past experiences, served as a "mobilisation tool" for reconceptualising motherhood (Giordano et al., 2002, p.1000). Her release marked an opportunity to embody the essence of what she described as being a "real mother". In doing so, she shifted the onus from external circumstances to her own affirmed agency and commitment to "stepping up" and fulfilling her maternal "responsibilities" differently than was the case before.

Within Bev's narrative, her self-realisation of the meaning and value ascribed to her children significantly contributed to her new perceptions of what she believes a 'good mother' to be:

*"I went on a journey of self-discovery, which changed me on a fundamental level. To be honest, I am now a better mom than I was before. My perception of what a good mother is has changed. In the past, I thought that a good mother could provide for her children, put them in the best schools and give them everything their heart desires. I was a very busy career-orientated mom, so I never really had time for my kids. Now, I am more present in their lives and more intentional when it comes to affection. I have realised that being a good mother is being able to say sorry and own up to your mistakes."* -

(Bev, 50)

Bev reported that she initially associated being a good mother with providing for material needs, access to quality education, and fulfilling her children's desires. This perception aligns with findings by Takseva and Bareiss (2015) and Woodbury and Durfee (2009) who argue that in a consumerist society which emphasises the external tangible aspects of parenting, spending money on children is a means of self-expression and influences the desired maternal persona with aspirations tied to material belongings. This view is not just linked to consumerism but also speaks more generally to how one's conceptualisation of motherhood changes, where parents may have understood their roles as only providing and making sure their children are safe and not establishing emotional relationships with their children (Deacey, 2005).

Bev, being a busy career-orientated mother before her incarceration, seemed to suggest that her focus on professional success led to limited time for her children due to work commitments. However, it seemed that her incarceration and separation from her children prompted a significant shift in her perception and approach to motherhood. After her release from prison, she became more present in her children's lives, which implies a conscious effort to spend quality time with her children and to be emotionally available. Furthermore, she reported being more "intentional" when it comes to affection. For her, perhaps the most profound realisations were the importance of

apologising, taking accountability and understanding that perfection is not a prerequisite for being a good mother. In summary, Bev's redefinition of being a 'good mother' appeared to shift from a materialistic and career-focused view of motherhood to a deeper, more emotionally connected, and self-aware perspective.

Based on Paternoster and Bushway's (2009) theory of identity desistance, individuals change when they realise that criminal behaviour is no longer compatible with their future aspirations. Nina's experience aligns with this theory, as she expressed that having previously grappled with drug dependence, her sobriety served as a pathway to reconceptualisation and practising motherhood differently:

*"Since my release, I have made a big change. I left my life of crime and substance abuse in the past. I do believe [that] there is a good mother [inside]. I was not a good mother. I used to be a bad role model because of my battle with substance abuse and criminal behaviour. Since my release, I have stopped drinking and offending, not just for myself but [also] for my children." - (Nina, 46)*

Nina's account seems to allude to how her 'desistance' hinged on her commitment to sobriety, where her children served as a significant source of motivation for her not to reoffend (see Pollock, 2013; Urbina, 2008). By prioritising her children's well-being, she articulated a transformative shift in her approach to motherhood from perceived negative behaviours to a more positive and engaged mothering style. Although the study by Ming, Yan, and Lau (2011) does not directly address Nina's point about being a good mother but involving being a good role model. It does explore how previously incarcerated women, like Nina, must navigate the simultaneous challenges of substance abuse and the demands of motherhood.

These findings suggest that mothers struggling with substance abuse often face difficulties in managing their self-perception as caregivers. This was also evident in Lee's account:

*"A good mother is always there for her child, helps them with homework, sees when they are suffering, and spends time with them. I used to be a bad mother because I never did*

*any of those things. I never worried about them, put my needs above theirs, and used drugs. Where was I when they needed me? Mothers can change. I know this because I have changed and become a better mother. Since my release, I have not used drugs or alcohol. Many times, people have offered [them to] me, but I say no. Before, I would have said yes, but now my children come first in my life.” - (Lee, 44)*

A study by Maruna (2001) analysed the narratives of previously incarcerated people who desist from criminal offending. Within these narratives, participants articulated what Maruna termed a “redemption script.” Central to this script is understanding how to best overcome challenges by being committed to rectifying past mistakes, referred to as “making good,” and also exercising agency in accountability and responsibility. Lee seemed to suggest that she once perceived herself as being a bad mother because she was not there for her children, was emotionally unavailable, did not help with homework and overlooked her children’s suffering. Furthermore, she talks about prioritising her own needs and using drugs. Illustrated in her account was her self-awareness and self-reflection by recognising the shortcomings in her previous approach to motherhood. Lee’s account is supported by Kay (2018), who stated that awareness of one’s strengths, weaknesses and unresolved life issues brings about self-awareness, which often drives change. Lee conveyed a strong desire and commitment to becoming a better mother. She then reflected on the positive changes she had made since her release, specifically mentioning abstaining from drugs and alcohol, which demonstrated a commitment to sobriety and personal improvement. In addition, Lee talked about her children coming first, signifying a shift from what she believed was self-centeredness to prioritising her children’s well-being. Her account suggests a fundamental change in her perspective and values.

Lee reported that her journey was marked by an adoption of a new approach to mothering, characterised by greater awareness, sobriety, and a commitment to being present for her children. This narrative is particularly poignant in light of Hentschel et al., (2019) exploration of the enduring social expectations placed on mothers, and continuing to shape society’s beliefs about what

constitutes being a good mother. Furthermore, it underscores the importance of recognising past mistakes, making amends, and actively working towards a more positive and engaged mothering style, which is an approach also taken by Sue:

*"I am becoming a better mother. It is going to take time, but I can already see change. Prison is a terrible place, but I thank God for putting me there because it changed me. I used to classify myself as a bad mother because I neglected my kids and put others above them. I lived a life of luxury, but at what cost? My relationship with my kids was non-existent. I did not know or care where they were. The maid raised them because I was too busy making money. I forgot that I had kids. My son always tells me that I am not a bad mom. I corrected him and said I was a bad mother, but I turned my life around and became a good mother. My life is not about riches anymore. It is about togetherness. I am happy now, even in this two-bedroomed place. There is love and peace, so we are much closer. I was horrible and impatient, but now I am calm, patient and listen."* - (Sue, 49)

Based on Sue's account, she initially classified herself as a 'bad' mother due to what she thought of as the 'neglect' of her children and her tendency to put her desires and the pursuit of wealth above her responsibilities as a parent (Allsop et al., 2020). This self-awareness seems to allude to her recognising past shortcomings and actively seeking to change for the better. Based on her account, her former lifestyle came at the expense of her relationship with her children, to the extent that her domestic worker effectively raised them. Sue's narrative outlines a shift from what she described as nonchalant mothering and a materialistic lifestyle to one characterised by increased introspection, transformation, and a redefinition of what makes a good mother. Evident in her account is the pride she took in her efforts at self-improvement and fostering a healthier and more fulfilling relationship with her children; *"I have grown, so I am proud of myself. I have another shot at motherhood. I do not see myself as a perfect mother, but I want to be better."*

Similarly, several other participants also reported periods of self-reflection, which allowed them to focus on the present and strive for improvement as mothers instead of speculating about the future and feeling anxiety about the unknown (see, also, Larsen & Nelson, 2017). Jess recounted her experience of being incarcerated and the steps she took to return to society as a “better mother.” She reflects:

*“I did a lot of self-reflection, healed, and made peace with all the mistakes and pain I caused, so [that] when I came out, I could focus on the present. I am so motivated to do better and be better as a mother.” - (Jess, 42)*

One of the primary considerations for some mothers in prison is to reunite with their children once released, and sometimes a woman’s only source of hope and motivation to drive her to change is her children (Covington, 2002). The experience of imprisonment, as discussed by Urbina (2008) and supported by the excerpts above, although demotivating and dehumanising for most, paradoxically leads some mothers to emerge with newfound energy, confidence, and motivation to change.

Underscored in research by Giordano et al., (2002), Laub and Sampson (2003), and Schlager (2013) is the notion that incarceration can sometimes be a turning point for change in mothers’ lives. According to Mara:

*“It was a blessing. I was able to get out of an abusive marriage. So now I do not have to fight battles they get pulled into. I can be a mom now and dedicate all my time and attention to my children.” - (Mara, 46)*

For Mara and most mothers in this study, being able to practise motherhood differently following their release from prison and having access to their children and forming relationships with them seemed to be a defining opportunity which they needed in order to rectify their past mistakes.

The participants' experience of incarceration resulted in the transformation of their perceptions of ‘good’ motherhood. Prior to their incarceration, some participants equated being a ‘good mother’ with material provision, but post-incarceration they prioritised emotional presence and active involvement in their children’s lives. Being incarcerated and separated from their children

made these mothers more cognisant of the significance and value their presence adds to their children's well-being and the importance of the mother-child relationship (Mayer, 2009, p. 30). While the experience of prison per se may not have brought about this change, the women seemed to identify the opportunity to self-reflect and re-envision themselves and their roles as mothers as being central to their shifting conceptualisation of motherhood.

The following theme explores more closely the factors that shaped the participants' experiences of motherhood, namely the myth of the maternal instinct, the experience of being mothered, and the challenges of motherhood before and after incarceration, which included the institutional barriers of prison, and the stigma experienced upon their reintegration.

### **The Factors that Shape the Experiences of Motherhood**

The insistence that mothering is 'natural' compels mothers to measure their experiences against rigid standards of (good) motherhood (Walls, 2010). An important point to make is the fact that even for mothers, motherhood is learnt, challenging this assumption of its 'naturalness.' Moreover, the myth that mothering is natural fails to acknowledge the diverse array of individual experiences and demographics that significantly influence how mothers carry out their mothering roles. For instance, participants who face institutional barriers in prison struggle to adhere to societal expectations, and the stigma upon reintegration into society hinders their chances of finding employment to provide for their children. These challenges collectively shaped participants' mothering experiences and highlighted the need to recognise the multifaceted factors influencing motherhood beyond the narrow confines of traditional norms of mothering and motherhood.

### ***The Myth of Maternal Instinct and the Experience of Being Mothered***

A discourse that is problematic for mothers is the 'myth of the maternal instinct'—an extension of the prevailing ideology of motherhood. This is defined by Badinter (2011) as a societal belief that women inherently possess the instinctual and biological ability to care for and nurture their children without needing external assistance or guidance. However, the narratives of the women in this study challenge this notion and highlight the need for support and the learned nature

of mothering. The absence of maternal figures in the lives of some of the participants and the impact of a troubled upbringing accentuated the importance of individual choices and experiences in shaping approaches to motherhood, so debunking the oversimplification of maternal instinct.

Mary challenged the notion of maternal instinct and emphasised the importance of seeking advice and support when mothering:

*“Admitting that sometimes, as a mother, you cannot do it all alone takes courage. So, having to seek advice from a third party is very important. I am constantly doing that because I do not have all the answers.” - (Mary)*

Mothers are frequently referred to as *“not talking”* about their struggles. This silence is informed by broader cultural expectations of a “good enough mother” who never struggles or complains about her multiple responsibilities as a mother (Jeannes & Shefer, 2004, p. 30). The fact that Mary recognises that it takes courage to admit that you cannot do it alone seems to suggest that she is aware of this problematic expectation. While this quote does not explicitly address maternal instinct—where all mothers supposedly possess an innate knowledge of parenting—it implies how societal expectations can pressure mothers to parent independently, without external help or support. Therefore, mothers seeking support would potentially be seen as having something ‘broken’ within, as they are supposed to know how to mother, instinctively (Spjeldnæs, 2021).

The dialogue below, between the researcher and Milly, highlighted Milly’s perspective on motherhood and maternal instinct:

**Researcher:** “So, you did not have a mother figure or someone to guide you on how to mother?”

**Milly:** “People have this misconception about motherhood. It (mothering) does not come naturally to all women. It didn't come naturally to me. I believe motherhood must be modelled and taught to you. I had to just wing it (motherhood).”

Milly challenges the notion that mothering comes naturally; instead, she acknowledges that the practice must be learned and modelled. Milly suggests that it did not come naturally to her, but rather she had to figure motherhood out as she went along because she did not have guidance from her own mother. This perspective suggests that mothering is a skill that requires instruction and modelling rather than an innate instinct (Pacella, 2005).

Sue's excerpt reinforces and supports Pacella's (2005) stance that mothering is not instinctual but learned. According to Sue; *"How you mother is also based on your upbringing and mothering experience."* Rather than being innate, Sue explained that mothering is influenced and shaped by one's experience of being mothered. This implies that the skills and behaviours associated with mothering are learned and developed through personal experiences rather than inherent or instinctual traits.

Ironically, only a few mothers in this study received this support from their mothers. While the notion of a maternal instinct is deeply ingrained in various cultures, it lacks substantial scientific evidence. However, the relationship between motherhood ideologies and societal expectations has reinforced the idea that a woman's worth is tied to her ability to effortlessly care for her children (Frizelle & Kell, 2009).

Contrary to what the myth of the maternal instinct would have women believe, research has shown that the experience of being mothered is important in shaping maternal approaches (Gilbert, 2002). In light of these diverse perspectives, the notion of maternal instinct denies the complex realities of motherhood and the unique experiences and choices of individual mothers.

In contrast to the narratives of participants with absent mothers or challenging mothering experiences, Tina's account is a noteworthy illustration of how her experience of being mothered informed her approach to motherhood:

*"I had a good upbringing. I had a providing system at home, and I never lacked anything. I had a good and caring mother that was always there. She instilled the power of prayer*

*and the need to take the kids to church so they would grow up with the right morals and values. I definitely mother my kids the way my mother mothered me.” - (Tina, 42)*

Tina’s account encapsulates the impact of her upbringing on her approach to motherhood. Tina highlights the importance of a present and caring mother. Tina’s experience appears to have significantly shaped her parenting style, as she expressed keenness to emulate her mother’s approach to raising her children. This observation aligns with IJzendoorn’s (1992) concept of intergenerational parenting patterns, which suggests that core attitudes and behaviours in maternal practice can be intentionally or unintentionally transmitted from one generation to the next. Tina’s story is a valuable example of the intergenerational transmission of values and mothering approaches.

In contrast, however, Sarah’s experience of being mothered was significantly less affirming:

*“When I started using drugs, she [her mother] wrote me off, and when I was kicked out everything went downhill. It was not the rehab that I needed, but rather my mother’s love and for her to comfort me. I wanted her to tell me that everything was going to be all right. Instead, she shut me out. So, I had to learn [mothering] as I went along.” -*

(Sarah)

In Sarah’s account, she highlights the need to have a mother to look up to for guidance and support. Her experience of being mothered seemed to reflect an absence of maternal support and a maternal figure during a challenging period of substance abuse. This absence seemed to compel Sarah to navigate and develop mothering practices alone, without reference to learned behaviours and her own experience of being mothered. However, it is important to acknowledge that this is much more than just the absence of a maternal figure; instead, it appears that there was a significant relational rupture. The account above affirms Forna’s (1999) view of mothering as a learned process. Kaplan (1992) adds another layer, arguing that psychological dynamics rooted in childhood experiences and being mothered significantly inform a mother’s approach to raising her children. Together, these perspectives highlight the intricate interplay between past experiences and the ongoing influence of

maternal figures, so challenging the simplistic notions of maternal instinct and underscoring the complexities of mothering.

While acknowledging her difficult childhood, Jess seemed to have chosen to be a different kind of mother:

*“My mother always embarrassed me and yelled at me in front of people. She made me feel like the black sheep of the family. I never even had a platform to talk. I never want to follow in my mother’s footsteps. I always think back to my messed-up childhood, and I vow to myself that I will never treat my daughter the way I was. I [will] make sure to treat her differently. I speak to her in a different tone of voice, and I make sure we have a good understanding of each other. My mother never made that type of effort with me.”*

(Jess)

Barlow and Cairns (1997) referred to the above concept as corrective experiences, where mothers intentionally deviate from their negative experience of being mothered or negative mothering patterns to mother their children differently. This notion echoed in her narrative, highlights the maternal figures’ enduring influence in shaping mothering approaches and values. Jess’ account seemed to reflect the significance of individual choices and experiences in shaping one’s approach to motherhood. It offers a poignant reflection on a mother-child relationship marked by negative experiences, including embarrassment and harsh treatment.

The negative emotional backdrop of embarrassment and harsh treatment propelled Jess to consciously break away from the pattern she experienced with her mother. This effort is revealed in her commitment to use a different tone of voice and to foster mutual understanding with her daughter.

Similarly, Jill’s narrative showcased the impact of what she described as a physically present but emotionally distant mother in shaping how she mothered her children:

*“Physically, my mother was there and supported me, but she was not affectionate or nurturing. She was cold. I did not want to be like that, so I overcompensated in the*

*affection department. Perhaps I went a bit overboard with my children as I was present at every little win or failure in their lives. We spoke about everything, and I doted on them. I would rather have a mother who dotes on me 24/7 than one who is ice-cold.” - (Jill, 64)*

Jill’s account provided an additional dimension of mothering by highlighting the impact of a physically present but emotionally distant mother. Jill’s response was to compensate by being highly affectionate and nurturing to create a warm and communicative environment for her children. Her account reflected a reaction to her perceived shortcomings in her upbringing.

These accounts showcase how participants’ experiences of being mothered influenced their approach to mothering their children, thus challenging the concept of maternal instinct. Other factors that shaped motherhood were the participant’s challenges of navigating motherhood while incarcerated and how the stigma associated with being incarcerated limited their ability to meet parenting responsibilities upon reintegration, all of which will be discussed below.

### ***The Challenges of Mothering***

Mothering in itself is challenging, but the demanding role of motherhood becomes even more challenging in prison. For most mothers in this study, being separated from their children was the hardest part of their imprisonment. This challenge is commonly experienced by women in prison, as Powell et al., (2017) and Walker et al., (2021) noted. The unique challenges posed by the prison environment, namely physical separation from their children, visitation and communication restrictions, loss of decision-making power over their children, dependence on others, and the inability to fulfil caregiving responsibilities, all contributed to the heightened complexity and challenges of the participants’ experiences of motherhood. Structuring the theme chronologically during and after incarceration provides insight into how the challenges faced by incarcerated mothers do not cease upon release; instead, they persist and evolve throughout the reintegration process.

**During Incarceration.** Incarceration created physical separation from, and substantial barriers to, communication with participants' families and children, which challenged mothering even more (Clement, 1993; Snyder et al., 2002). Mothers in this study were removed from daily family life and experienced a dramatic loss of power over their own lives and the power and involvement in their children's lives. Prison is not an environment that is conducive to meaningful conversations (Hutton, 2016), and structural barriers do not allow for the nurturing of interpersonal relationships with family members, especially children. The ability to emotionally support children throughout a prison sentence is limited to telephonic communication, letter writing, and facilitated visits.

The emotional toll of separation and the inability to actively mother one's child was vividly expressed by participants like Sally, who likened it to the feeling of someone having died:

*"In prison, you are technically not a mother. How can you be when the most important functions of being a mother are taken away, like helping with homework, fetching from school, being emotionally supporting? So, you have to entrust your child to other people. It was devastating—almost like someone had died."* - (Sally)

Although incarceration is generally a challenging experience for all inmates, the added separation from their children often emerges as the primary concern and difficulty faced by mothers during their imprisonment (Enos, 2021). Sally's comparison of her experience of trying to be a mother while incarcerated to a devastating loss— *"almost like someone had died"*—seemed to convey the emotional impact of being separated from her child and being unable to carry out maternal roles and responsibilities. Reflected in Sally's account are the emotional and practical challenges that incarcerated mothers face in maintaining their roles as mothers, further emphasizing that the most important functions of being a mother are taken away in prison. These included aspects of motherhood, such as helping with homework, picking up her child from school, and providing emotional support, which is impossible to fulfil while incarcerated; all essential components that contribute significantly to children's well-being and growth according to Schmid et al. (2022). The

phrase, “So, you have to entrust your child to other people,” seems to underscore her helplessness and need to rely on others to fulfil these mothering duties. She expanded on this feeling of helplessness and the difficulties she experienced while being a mother in prison:

*“For a year, I did not touch or hug her. Her father fed her negative information, so she pulled away, making communication difficult. I had to accept that I could not be a mother, and our relationship could be over. Our visits were through plexiglass as if I were a dangerous criminal who must be kept behind glass. There are time constraints and no privacy. I wrote and phoned her every weekend to remind her that I loved her.” - (Sally)*

In this quote, Sally illuminates the challenges she encountered during her incarceration by emphasising the physical separation from her daughter behind plexiglass during visits and the consequent perception of potentially being seen as dangerous to her child and that her child needs to be protected from her. This experience aligns with the findings of Corston (2007), who posited that when a mother is incarcerated, there is an inherent societal tendency to label her as a ‘bad mother’. Sally also reflected on the challenges of maintaining communication with her child, especially when negative information from her daughter’s father strained their relationship. However, Sally’s dedication to writing to and also calling her daughter every weekend to remind her of her love demonstrated her enduring commitment to being a mother despite the constraints of the prison environment. The above quotes highlight the challenges that incarcerated mothers, like Sally experience, which often include emotional distancing from their children, limited physical contact, and the perception of being isolated and stigmatised.

Often, coupled with negotiating and navigating the challenges of being a mother in prison is the emotional turmoil and loss of control that incarcerated mothers like Bev experienced:

*“I constantly thought about how my children were doing, who was giving them food, keeping them clean and safe and who was there for them. Before prison, I was the only one that cared for them. Their father is uninvolved. You feel so guilty, helpless, and*

*frustrated. You totally lose control of the things that you used to have control of. You now have no control.” - (Bev)*

Bev’s constant thoughts about her children seem to reveal the deep concern and love she has for them, even amid the stress of her incarceration. Her worries about their well-being, from their basic needs like food and cleanliness to their safety and access to emotional support, demonstrates her longing to protect and provide for her children. The contrast with their supposedly uninvolved father further highlights Bev’s unique and vital role and function as a mother. She described feeling “*guilty, helpless and frustrated*” when recounting her experience of being in prison and the disruption of her maternal role. Her feelings convey the complex and overwhelming emotions and challenges experienced when trying to mother from prison. This, according to Pogrebin and Dodge (2001), is understandable given that incarcerated mothers often report having elevated levels of psychological distress, given the lack of control and forced separation associated with incarceration (Dargis & Somoza, 2021). In the light of this research, it seemed that Bev’s guilt stemmed from not being physically present to care for her children as she had been before, the helplessness from her inability to control their circumstances and the frustration from the limitations imposed by her incarceration. Bev’s account confirmed her enduring love and concern for her children and the unique challenges she faced while navigating the complexities of motherhood within the constraints of the prison environment. These constraints made it almost impossible to mother her children. And according to Milly:

*“I had no control over what was going on outside. It is not possible to be a mother. You are stripped of this identity. You see your children maybe once a week, so you cannot mother them in that time. That was the hardest part for me; being in a place where my hands were completely tied, and I had absolutely no control over what was going on in their lives or what they were doing.” - (Milly)*

Evident in Milly’s account are the challenges and frustrations that incarcerated mothers face in maintaining their identity and maternal role. She seemed to convey her sense of powerlessness in

shaping or supervising her children's lives during her time in prison. Furthermore, Milly reflected on the disempowerment that is often experienced by incarcerated mothers (Dargis, 2021), which spoke to a broader issue faced by incarcerated mothers in this study: the loss of control that is inherent to incarceration. Dallaire et al., (2010) noted the positive impact of regular contact on the bond between incarcerated mothers and their children. However, Milly's circumstances starkly contrasted with this ideal scenario. Confined by the constraints of incarceration, Milly could see her children only once a week. This infrequent contact amplified her challenges of maintaining her maternal bond compared to the consistent communication emphasised by Dallarie et al., (2010). While Dallaire et al., (2010) revealed the strengthening effects of regular correspondence, Milly's limited interaction highlights the struggles of incarcerated mothers with nurturing relationships with their children. Her account underscored her disempowerment, her loss of self as a mother, and the difficulties of maintaining a bond with her children.

In contrast to Milly, Nina had a non-existent relationship with her children, as they began referring to their aunt as "Ma", leaving her feeling "replaced and devastated.":

*"They stayed with their aunt but started calling her Ma, which broke me. I felt like I was being replaced. It was devastating. How can you call another woman mom? When I came out, they did not stop calling her mom. That bond we had was broken. They are very cold towards me. I do not feel like a mother anymore. Prison took that away from me." - (Nina)*

While in prison, the impossibility of physical mothering necessitates the delegation of mothering responsibilities to family members, which, according to Nina, can disrupt or even sever the mother-child relationship, leading to feelings of estrangement and an overwhelming sense of loss (Dargis & Somoza, 2021). Nina reflected on the emotional turmoil and profound impact that incarceration had on her relationship with her children, and on her emotional upheaval, distress, and displacement experienced when she realised that her children had started referring to their aunt as "Ma". This shift in her children's language use signified a change in their perception of maternal figures and a

potential loss of the bond they once shared with her. Nina's feeling of being replaced is a common emotional response and challenge among incarcerated mothers in this study, who must contend with the presence of other caretakers in their children's lives. Nina's painful experience seemed to further compound her sense of loss, anguish, and disconnection from her children and decreased her sense of self as a mother. Overall, her account underscores the emotional toll of incarceration on the mother-child bond and how these changes can lead to profound feelings of loss and estrangement for incarcerated mothers.

Much like how maternal figures were replaced, so too were husbands, and according to Lind (2014), there is a strong correlation between being married while incarcerated and higher rates of divorce. This finding was evident in the current study's participants, where many were divorced after being released from prison:

*"I would cry myself to sleep so many nights because I could feel my children's hurt, abandonment, and helplessness. There was nothing I could do about it. My husband met someone else and moved on. He moved in with her, and the kids felt deserted. When Max needed me the most, I was not there. I would reach out to people by writing letters. I would ask my aunt if she could pick Nancy up and take her for lunch or if I was concerned about Max whether she could do something with him. It just made me feel a bit better knowing I could still look after them from prison." - (Cara, 51)*

Cara spoke about the prison barriers that she had to navigate when trying to be a mother to her children and gave a poignant depiction of the emotional distress and the powerful maternal concerns that incarcerated mothers often experience. Her account vividly conveys the depth of her emotional connection to her children, but also that her distress was motivated by guilt and projections. She also seemed to be acutely aware of her children's emotional turmoil in response to the upheaval caused by her incarceration, the breakdown of her marriage, and her husband's new relationship. The phrase *"I could feel my children's hurt"* underscored her empathy and the emotional burden she carried even while separated from her children. The mention of her husband

moving on and living with someone else seems to refer to the sense of abandonment that her children may have felt during this time, as she was unable to be there for them when they needed her. Despite the myriad institutional barriers, mothers like Cara demonstrated a sense of agency by actively staying involved in their children's lives and mothering them from a distance through letter writing and seeking support from family. Letter writing, a practice within the participants' control during incarceration, was a tangible opportunity to mother their children and express commitment to their children's welfare (Clarke, 2004), even from a distance. These endeavours not only showcased their determination to maintain a connection with their children but also highlighted their ongoing commitment to mothering their children, so illustrating the resilience and love that the mothers in this study exhibit in challenging circumstances.

The challenges of negotiating motherhood during incarceration were evident in the accounts of participants in this study. For example, there were restricted opportunities to carry out mothering tasks and a compromised sense of self as a mother. Overall, participants seemed to grapple with how best to care for their children while in prison. In turn, their sense of failing to fulfil their mothering role increased feelings of guilt, frustration, anxiety, and loss of power over their own lives and of their children. The challenges faced by these incarcerated mothers do not conclude within the prison walls; instead, they extend into the process of reintegration into society, as is evident in the accounts below.

**After Incarceration.** Gender expectations are a set of cultural and societal norms that dictate how individuals should behave and fulfil specific roles and responsibilities according to their gender. For women, these are expectations related to caregiving, homemaking, and nurturing (Mofokeng, 2021). The expectation that women are solely responsible for caregiving posed significant mothering challenges for participants in this study. For previously incarcerated women, fulfilling these societal expectations is further complicated by their encounters with stigma, lack of support, unemployment, addiction, and single parenthood (Mayer, 2012). This was true for Bev, who

has been unemployed since her release six years ago. Bev and other participants cited the inability to provide for their children as the biggest mothering challenge since their release:

*"I have not had any positive feedback on the job applications that I've made so far. I am, unfortunately, totally dependent on my dad, who supports us with his pension. My ex-husband is not really providing for the girls with maintenance and that kind of thing. So that's sort of an ongoing battle. What I hate the most is being unable to provide them with basic needs like toiletries. They are girls, so they have more needs than men in the hygiene department. It frustrates me not being able to provide for them how I would like to." - (Bev)*

As previously mentioned, society places significant pressure on women to effortlessly resume and meet the demands and responsibilities of their caregiving roles, providing monetary assistance for their children, ensuring suitable housing, and offering emotional support (Strimelle & Frigon, 2011).

Bev expressed her frustration at not being able to provide for her daughter's basic needs. The frustration was further compounded by societal stigma and the challenges that formerly incarcerated women often face when seeking employment. Garcia (2016) reported that, often, previously incarcerated women are stigmatised and chastised according to social beliefs about motherhood, for example, mothers are expected to assume the exclusive responsibility for their children. However, in Bev's case, she assumed sole responsibility without the support of her children's father (Etherington 2007). As shown in the above quote, the lack of support from Bev's ex-husband placed a heavier burden on her. Underscored in her narrative is an important point; her experience highlights how societal expectations of mothers and their responsibilities clash with the obstacles the previously incarcerated encounter upon reintegration.

According to Milly, these expectations and obstacles *"set you up for failure."* The main cause of reoffending is lack of income. This notion of resorting back to crime was also highlighted in Nonhle's account:

*“Women will resort back to crime to provide. I had to send my children away ... it was difficult. My criminal record makes it hard to find a job. I want to take responsibility ... the fact that I cannot be responsible and look after my kids breaks my heart.” - (Nonhle, 37)*

Based on Nonhle’s account above, it seems that the stigma she faced for having been previously incarcerated hindered her ability to find employment and, in turn, affected her caregiving and providing for her children. Her narrative exemplifies her struggles and challenges as a mother to physically and emotionally care for her children and provide for their material needs:

*“People who do not understand my situation will say I do not love or care about them because they do not live with me, but they are with family who can give them opportunities. I only want the best for them. Why must I leave my child at home while I look for a job? It is not safe. At least they are now safe. It would be selfish if I remove the children from the family—they will not get an education or everything they are getting now.” - (Nonhle)*

Nonhle’s account highlights societal stigma and misconceptions associated with women who have been previously incarcerated. Based on her account, sending her children to live with family members who can provide better opportunities, and education shows the complex decisions mothers in her position must make (Mofokeng, 2021). Nonhle’s account seemed to underscore the lengths women may have to go to meet societal expectations, even when they face stigma and employment challenges. Despite the financial constraints and separation from her children, Nonhle maintained a positive self-perception as a good mother:

*“I want to be a better mother but cannot be one financially. Despite my financial situation, I know I am a good mother. If one day I can provide for them, then I can be part of their life.” - (Nonhle)*

This further highlighted Nonhle's commitment to her children's well-being and her belief in the love and care she provides, even in the face of societal judgements and employment obstacles. Here, we see an illustration of the complex decisions and sacrifices mothers make to secure the best future for their children, so challenging traditional notions of what this means to mothers facing societal obstacles and bias because of their incarceration.

Jess' quote resonated powerfully with Nonhle's account, particularly in the context of wanting to provide for her daughter after incarceration while contending with the enduring stigma:

*"I have a 13-year-old daughter, but we live apart. She deserves the best, and I cannot give that to her. I cannot even find a job because of my criminal record, so I cannot support her financially or contribute towards her upbringing. In 2018, I was out on parole, but I broke it after five months because I just could not take everyone complaining and criticising me because I could not contribute ... I'm so scared I'm going to lose myself again. I'm not going to steal again and go back to prison. So, it's better for me to stay away from them." - (Jess)*

Jess expressed the desire to give her daughter the best, yet her criminal record was a substantial obstacle. She reported that her community's constant criticism and complaints were a relentless reminder of her past mistakes, which frustrated her and pushed her to reoffend when she was first paroled. For Jess, a life free of crime necessitated distancing herself from triggering environments, and sometimes her children. At times, the poor socioeconomic conditions that some participants found themselves in further jeopardised their chances of living a crime-free life. This was also evident in accounts by Terry; *"I need to stay away from bad influences and places that trigger me and remind me of my past,"* and Nina; *"I see how they all look at me, I even avoid certain places."* However, these women, like Jess, seemed to desire a new crime-free lifestyle, and although it was difficult for Jess to distance herself from her children, she seemed to accept that it was better for her daughter (Marcenko et al., 2000).

It seemed that Jess' fear of returning to her old ways was a testament to the immense emotional and psychological toll that the societal stigma places on previously incarcerated mothers. In her case, it seemed that distancing herself from her family was a way to protect herself from the overwhelming pressure and judgement, which, unfortunately, resulted in further separation from her daughter. Her account underscores the harsh lived reality of previously incarcerated women who try to rebuild their lives while cultivating their roles as caregivers, only to be criticised. The circumstances participants find themselves leave them with limited options. It is because of the lack of options that they may find themselves reoffending, no matter how hard they try to reconcile their past with societal expectations. Jess' narrative is a poignant reflection of the complex choices that some previously incarcerated mothers make in response to the impact of stigma on their employment prospects, as well as on their emotional well-being, which ultimately contributed to her decision to stay away from her daughter.

As previously mentioned, having a criminal record (which is rarely overlooked), impedes future employment prospects due to its stigma (Steyn, 2018). For Sue, having both a criminal record and being a single mother was particularly challenging when trying to parent:

*"I am a single parent. It is very tough because their father provides no support. I have to do everything on my own. I do not have a man that can speak to Gary. I must be a mother and a father. I need to support him financially—school fees, asthma medication and so on." - (Sue)*

Sue reported on the financial strain and additional responsibilities she must shoulder as a single previously incarcerated mother who receives no form of support from her children's father. These responsibilities can be particularly daunting for previously incarcerated women, who may face barriers to stable employment due to their criminal records. These women often grappled with heightened stigma and formidable obstacles as they endeavoured to fulfil their caregiving roles and meet societal demands, which encompassed both emotional and financial support for their children.

Based on the narratives presented, upon their reintegration, the standards to which previously incarcerated mothers are held are so high that they are automatically deemed 'bad' when trying to meet these expectations. According to Sharpe (2015, p. 1), long after a mother has left her life of crime behind her, she will continue to be stigmatised. Having previously been incarcerated puts barriers in place such as challenges with finding employment, which makes parenting hard. Sometimes, mothers in this study were compelled to make hard decisions like sending their children away, which positioned them as bad mothers as a result.

The process of reintegration into society can be problematic, especially for previously incarcerated women who are viewed by society and their communities as pariahs, who then face stigmatisation and marginalisation because of their imprisonment (Baldry, 2010; Chesney-Lind, 2006). Mothers, whether on parole or having completed their sentence, bear the sole responsibility for achieving successful reintegration into society (Burch, 2017). A vast majority of offending mothers in this study came from communities that lack adequate housing, have limited job opportunities, and are inundated with socioeconomic issues and inaccessible treatment centres (Richie, 1996). Based on findings from this study, previously incarcerated mothers face an ongoing struggle between meeting their children's basic needs and sourcing support services to cope with the challenges of functioning on the margins of society (Stone et al., 2017). The mothers in this study exemplify intersectional subjugation (Crenshaw, 1991)—their release from prison compounds with preexisting vulnerabilities, resulting in an additional layer of disempowerment.

This chapter explored the complexities of motherhood amid societal expectations, beliefs, and the impact of incarceration. It highlighted how previously incarcerated mothers face layered oppressions by challenging traditional roles and advocating a more inclusive understanding of motherhood. The findings reflect potential shifts from material provision to emotional connection in maternal roles post-incarceration, alongside the systemic barriers that exacerbate mothers' challenges.

The final chapter provides concluding commentary based on the findings presented in this study and the limitations of the study. It also offers recommendations for policy, practice and further research to better support previously incarcerated mothers in South Africa.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

This study highlighted the complex landscape of motherhood and the dynamic interplay between societal expectations, gender norms, cultural beliefs, and the experience of being incarcerated. Through an intersectional lens, multiple layers of oppression experienced by mothers, in particular those who have been previously incarcerated, were elucidated. Participants reflected on the profound tension between conforming to societal standards of being a 'good mother' and navigating their own identities and beliefs while also challenging the rigidity of traditional gender roles.

Moreover, the study elucidated the impact of incarceration on participants' perceptions of motherhood. While initially viewed through the lens of societal validation and material provision, motherhood evolved into a deeper commitment to emotional connection and active involvement in children's lives. This shift reflected a feminist perspective, from my research of view that prioritised the agency and empowerment of mothers while moving beyond simplistic notions of maternal instinct, even though the interviews did not have a feministic connotation. In addition, it illustrated how the experience of incarceration intersected with preexisting vulnerabilities, so exacerbating the challenges faced by these mothers upon reintegration into society.

The narratives of incarcerated mothers vividly depict the struggles of maintaining maternal bonds during physical separation, communication barriers, and societal stigmatisation. Their experiences highlighted the limitations of traditional maternal roles within the confines of the prison environment, shedding light on the need for systemic reforms to support incarcerated mothers. Furthermore, the findings underscore the ongoing struggle of previously incarcerated mothers to meet their children's basic needs while navigating their marginalisation. As previously mentioned, this was further compounded by preexisting vulnerabilities, resulting in an additional layer of disempowerment.

By focusing on the voices of offending mothers, the study calls for policy reforms and support systems that recognise and address the intersecting needs of mothers, thus fostering a more equitable and inclusive society.

### **Limitations**

Finding participants was challenging and time-consuming for me because female inmates make up only 3% of the prison population (Mamacos, 2021). The Western Cape's ethnic and racial makeup, according to World Population Review (2024), is as follows: Coloured: 42.4%; Black African: 38.6%; White: 15.7%; Asian or Indian: 1.4%; and Other: 1.9%. Even though it is fairly representative of the racial demographics in the Western Cape, the small accessible sample size made it impossible to loosely represent the South African population of incarcerated mothers. Because I only speak English, UCT honours students who speak IsiZulu, isiXhosa, and Afrikaans carried out a subsidiary study under our shared supervisor, Dr Maxine Spedding. Audio, transcription, and English translation of their four interviews were delivered to our supervisor for quality assurance and then forwarded to me, so I did not personally conduct these interviews.

My preference was to conduct in person interviews but, the increase in Covid-19 infections jeopardised health security at the time of data collection. Thus, in order to protect both myself and the participants, remote interviews were conducted on WhatsApp. The participants' socioeconomic circumstances restricted the data collection method. For instance, conducting WhatsApp video interviews was not possible due to issues with internet access, despite one gig of data being sent to participants. This had an impact on the participants' train of thought and the dialogue's flow. As a result, I started making phone calls. Phone conversations may have been experienced as impersonal by the participants and may have impeded rapport building between the participants and me. It further prevented the ability to interpret visual cues and body language.

Although the study acknowledged intersectionality, it might not have fully captured the nuanced ways in which maternal experiences are influenced by the intersections of race, class, and

other identity factors. As a result, the experiences of the participants may be oversimplified. The widespread stigma attached to being a mother and going to jail might have made participants less inclined to open up about some of their experiences, which may have led to underreporting.

### **Research Significance**

The study's findings could significantly contribute to psychology within South Africa, as well as feminist literature, which has very sparse information on incarcerated mothering. A first-hand account of previously incarcerated mothers' narratives allowed the researcher to build on preexisting studies. The previously incarcerated mothering population in South Africa was not easy to access or source. The intimate details and personal accounts of the participants' mothering experiences support the dominant narrative that previously incarcerated mothers are stigmatised and experience more significant challenges in mothering before, during and after their incarceration compared to mothers who have not been incarcerated. Research on the conceptualization and experiences of motherhood among previously incarcerated women in South Africa is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, without such research, the experiences and challenges faced by these mothers may continue to be overlooked in policy and societal discussions, perpetuating their underrepresentation. Secondly, a lack of research could result in a gap in understanding their specific needs, leading to inadequate policies and support systems for their rehabilitation and reintegration into society. Additionally, exploring this topic could shed light on the social stigma and discrimination faced by these women, challenging stereotypes and fostering empathy. Understanding the intersection of motherhood and incarceration in South Africa could also provide insights into broader social issues such as poverty, race, and access to justice.

### **Recommendations**

Following the study's findings, recommendations for supporting mothers, particularly ex-offenders, emerge. Each is addressed below.

The need for legislative reforms that recognise mothers' unique needs and a shift away from one-size-fits-all parenting is growing. This includes creating correctional programmes that promote parent-child involvement and post-release support services for reintegration and family reunion. Additional advances are needed to address the specific challenges incarcerated women face through targeted interventions. Policies should emphasise the quality and type of support mothers receive in prison and upon reintegration. This support should include financial, emotional, and psychological help to assist mothers and children to bond despite separation. Additionally, custody discussions should consider jailed mothers' conditions and parental rights and responsibilities. When possible, virtual visitation, parenting classes, and prisons with child-friendly environments can improve mother-child relationships.

Policymakers can create more egalitarian and supportive frameworks that address these women's issues by centring their concerns. It is also suggested that expanding geography parameters and sample size will diversify participant demographics and data. Possible longitudinal studies on the long-term effects of incarceration and reintegration on motherhood could document changes and developments.

An investigation into how prison policies, legal frameworks, and support services affect incarcerated mothers could improve the prison environment. Cross-cultural research is needed to understand how cultural and societal maternity norms vary. Implementing parenting classes, counselling, and re-entry programs could help incarcerated and nonincarcerated mothers support their children and maintain the mother-child bond during and after incarceration.

Addressing these recommendations will help future research better understand jailed and formerly incarcerated women, shaping policy and practice to better serve them.

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## Appendix A: Ethical Clearance

## UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN



## Department of Psychology

University of Cape Town Rondebosch 7701 South Africa  
Telephone (021) 650 3417  
Fax No. (021) 650 4104

31 March 2021

Rebecca Briscoe  
Department of Psychology  
University of Cape Town  
Rondebosch 7701

Dear Rebecca

I am pleased to inform you that ethical clearance has been given by an Ethics Review Committee of the Faculty of Humanities for your study, *Experiences of motherhood from the perspective of women who have been incarcerated*. The reference number is PSY2021-006.

I wish you all the best for your study.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lauren Wild'.

Lauren Wild (PhD)  
Associate Professor  
Chair: Ethics Review Committee

**Appendix B: Informed Consent****UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN****DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY****CONSENT FORM TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY**

**Study Title: Experiences of motherhood from the perspective of women who have been  
incarcerated**

**RESEARCHER: Rebecca Briscoe****SUPERVISOR: Dr Maxine Spedding**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

I am a master's student from the Department of Psychology at the University of Cape Town, and I would like to invite you to participate in my study. The purpose of this study is to understand more about the experiences of mothers who have been in prison. The reason why we want to learn more about this is because there is currently very little research about this. Participating in this study is entirely your choice. There is no pressure for you to take part, and there will be no consequences if you decide not to.

**Why are you being asked to participate?**

You are being asked to participate because you are: 18 years or older; you have been in prison within the last 5 years; and you had one or more children who were born before or while you were in prison.

**What does participation involve?**

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be invited to participate in an interview by phone or by video call. The interview will last 60 to 90 minutes, and you will be asked a variety of questions about your experiences of being a mother, both now and while you were in prison. The interview will be recorded, but no one will have access to the recordings except me and my supervisor.

**Are there any benefits to participating?**

You will receive a R150 grocery voucher to thank you for your time. There are no other direct benefits to you as a participant. Our goal is to use the information gathered in this study to help us understand more about the experiences of mothers who have been in prison. We hope that you gain some benefit from knowing that you are helping to add to our knowledge of this topic.

**What are the risks and costs associated with participating?**

Participation will require about 60–90 minutes of your time. The interview will take place via video or audio call, at a time that suits you best. You will be given one gig of data for the interview. The interview will be recorded.

Participating in the study should not put you at any risk. Some people may find that talking about certain subjects is difficult and could make them feel upset. You are free to choose not to answer a question, and you can stop the interview at any time – if this does happen, there will be no consequences. If you find that taking part in this study has made you feel uncomfortable or has brought up difficult or painful feelings, please let me know so that we can talk about what kind of support you might need. I will provide you with a list of possible resources for you to contact if you need more support.

**How will your identity and information be protected?**

The interview will be audio/video-recorded and transcribed – transcribing means we will write a text version of what you say. This is to ensure that we are able to get the most accurate picture of what

you tell me in the interview. The recording will be kept on a password-protected computer that only the researcher, her supervisor and transcriber will have access to it. Once the data have been transcribed and all of your identifying information (any information that may give away your identity) is removed, the recording will be destroyed. If we use professional transcription services, we will be required to sign an agreement to secure all data and return the recordings once the transcription is complete. They will also be required keep the data secure and confidential.

The information that you provide us in the interviews will be used to write a master's thesis, and some of it may be published in an academic journal. Sometimes, popular media also take an interest in the research that we produce. However, all of your identifying information, including your name, the name of your place of work, or any other information that someone else could use to know who you are will **not** appear in this research report or in any publications.

**What happens if you change your mind about participating?**

Participation in the study is entirely voluntary, which means that you are completely free to change your mind and there will be no consequences for you. If you decide to participate in the research project, you can decide to stop at any time and you will not need to explain why. If you choose to stop participating halfway through the interview process, the researcher will ask your consent to keep the recording of your interview. If you are not happy with this, the recording will be destroyed.

**Duty to report:**

In accordance with UCT's research ethics, there will be no action taken against you for whatever you decide to share. However, I have a duty to report any criminal or abusive acts being planned or taking place.

**If you have questions about the study, please feel free to contact the following people:**

**Rebecca Briscoe (Researcher):** Brsreb003@myuct.ac.za; 082 777 0149

**Dr Maxine Spedding (Supervisor):** maxine.spedding@uct.ac.za; 021 650 3452

**If you have any questions, comments or complaints about your rights as a study participant, please contact Ms Rosalind Adams at the Department of Psychology, University of Cape Town: 021 650 3417 or [rosalind.adams@uct.ac.za](mailto:rosalind.adams@uct.ac.za)**

I \_\_\_\_\_ (name) have read the above and I am happy with my understanding of the study, as well as the possible benefits, risks and alternatives. My questions about the study have been answered. I hereby voluntarily consent to participate in the research study as described. I have been offered copies of this consent form.

**Signature of Participant:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Researcher:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

I give permission for my interview to be recorded with an audio/video recorder and for the recording to be transcribed by a professional transcriber.

**Name of Participant (Printed):** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Participant:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C: Research advertisement



### Appendix C: Advertisement



We are doing research to understand more about the experiences of mothers who have been in prison. If you are a mother and you have had the experience of being in prison, I would like to talk to you!

**Study title: Experiences of Motherhood from the perspective of previously incarcerated women**

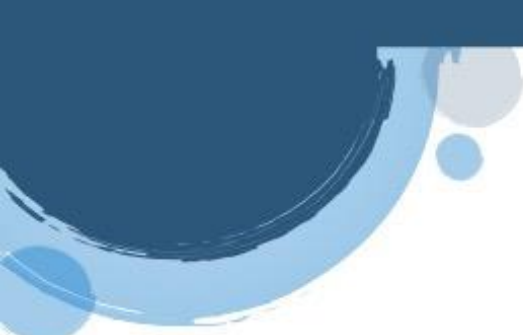
Hello, my name is Rebecca Briscoe. I am a Master's student in the Department of Psychology at the University of Cape Town. I am doing research on women's perceptions of motherhood and their experiences of being mothers before, during and after being in prison. I would like to interview between 12 and 15 mothers, who are 18 years or older, who have been in prison within the past 5 years, and who had children either before going to prison or while in prison.

#### **WHAT WILL BE REQUIRED OF YOU?**

Should you choose to participate in the study, you will be asked to take part in an interview with me that will last approximately 60-90-minutes. The interview will take place via video or voice call. You will be given 1 gig of data to carry out the interview so that you don't have to use your own data. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw from the study at any stage. There will be no consequences should you choose not to participate, or if you decide to withdraw.

#### **WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE INFORMATION THAT YOU PROVIDE?**

The interviews will be audio-recorded, and the recordings will be transcribed into text. The recordings and transcriptions will be locked in a password protected computer and only the researchers, supervisor and transcriber will have access to them. Once the recordings have been transcribed, they will be destroyed. All of your identifying information will be removed from the interview transcription, including your name, family members' names, place of work, and any other information that might make you recognisable to other people. That information will be used to



write research reports and may be submitted for publication in an academic journal. However, no one will be able to tell from reading those documents that you participated in the study.

#### **WHAT WILL YOU GET IN RETURN?**

In addition to helping me contribute to the limited amount of South African research on the motherhood experiences of women who have been in prison, you will also receive a grocery store voucher to the value of R150 to thank you for taking the time to participate in this study.


#### **ARE THERE ANY RISKS FOR YOU?**

There are very few risks to participating in this study. However, you may be asked some questions about your life experiences that feel uncomfortable for you to answer or may bring up painful memories. If that happens, you are free to refuse to answer any questions, or to ask for a break, or to withdraw from the study completely. You will also be provided with a list of free counselling services that you can contact if you feel that you need additional support.

#### **This study has been approved by the Research Ethics Committee within UCT's Psychology Department.**

If you are interested in participating in this study and would like to know more, please send a Whatsapp message to me, Rebecca Briscoe (the Researcher) at 0827770149. You can also reach me by email: [brsreb003@myuct.ac.za](mailto:brsreb003@myuct.ac.za).

If you have questions or concerns about this research, you may contact **Rosalind Adams** (as representative of the Ethics Committee)- [rosalind.adams@uct.ac.za](mailto:rosalind.adams@uct.ac.za) or 021 650 5417.



## Appendix D: Resource List



### For 24/7 assistance:

- **Cipla:** A free 24-hour counselling helpline. Counselling is also available via WhatsApp.
  - General: 0800 456 789
  - WhatsApp: 076 88 22 775
  - Drug Safety: 080 222 6662
  - Email:
  - Website: [cipla.co.za](http://cipla.co.za)
  
- **LifeLine:** This is a toll-free number, and different counsellors are proficient in the 11 different official South African languages.
  - General: 0861 322 322.
  - Gender-based violence: 0800 150 150.
  - AIDS: 0800 012 322.
  - Email:
  - Website: [lifelinesa.co.za](http://lifelinesa.co.za)
  
- **South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG):**
  - Counsellors are available between 8 am and 8 pm weekly.
  - General helpline: 0800 456 789.
  - Suicidal emergencies: 0800 567 567.
  - Email:

- Website: [sadag.org](http://sadag.org)
- Other services: Mental health information available; referral services; free medical treatment where available; workshops and support groups.

**Counselling/Support groups/Other organisations:**

- to you.
- **NICRO:** This organisation specialises in helping previous offenders reintegrate back into their communities and providing free family and individual therapy. They aid communities and families empower offenders to live a new, healthy lifestyle.
  - Walk-in services are provided (see website for more info)
  - General: 021 462 0017
  - Website: [nicro.org.za](http://nicro.org.za)
  - Email: [info@nicro.org.za](mailto:info@nicro.org.za)
  - Address: 4 Buitensingel St, Schotsche Kloof, Cape Town 8001
  - Other services: Legal aid; psychosocial assessments for court; tracking and aftercare; development of management plans; parenting programme; community service learning.
- **The parent centre:** Parents and guardians are taught positive and healthy parenting skills. Free training, counselling and support are provided.
  - General: 021 762 0116
  - Website: [theparentcentre.org.za](http://theparentcentre.org.za)
  - Email: [marketing@theparentcentre.org.za](mailto:marketing@theparentcentre.org.za)
  - Address: 22 Wetton Road, Wynberg 7800.

## Appendix E: Interview Schedule



### Rapport:

- Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed today. I am very interested in learning more about you and your experiences of being a mother. Are you comfortable and ready to begin?
- How are you today and how do you feel about doing this interview with me?
- What made you want to participate in this research study?
- Pseudonyms

**1. I'd like to start by asking you a little more about your life as it is right now. Could you perhaps tell me a little about yourself?**

[Prompts: current employment, living situation, family and children]

**2. Tell me more about your children**

[Prompts: ages, genders, quality of relationship, personalities, challenges]

**3. What is it like to be a mother? How do you feel about it?**

[Prompts: what do you enjoy, what do you dislike, what is difficult?]

**4. What was your experience of being mothered and raised by your own mother and/or guardian?**

[Prompts: quality of relationship as a child, what did she do well, what would you have liked her to do differently or better?]

**5. How would you define a 'good' mother? What makes a mother a 'good' mother?**

[Prompts: What makes someone a good or a bad mother? Who do you think of as an example of a good mother? And an example of a bad mother?]

**6. Where do you think your idea of what a good/bad mother comes from?**

**7. Can you describe your experience of being an incarcerated mother?**

[Prompts: contact with children, challenges of mothering, children's living circumstances, your relationships, who helped/supported you as a mother during this time, how did being in prison affect you as a mother?]

**8. How did your experience of being a mother change after you were released?**

[Prompts: how was it different from before you were in prison?]

**9. Can you tell me more about how you felt people treated you when you were released?**

[Prompts: differences in attitude, changes in family relationships and friendships, people who have been supportive.]

**10. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your experience that I maybe didn't ask you about?**

**Reflection:**

- Do you have any questions that you would like to ask me?
- How did you find the interview and were you comfortable doing it?
- In what ways could it be improved?
- How are you feeling emotionally? (Remind participant about free mental health services)
- Thank you very much for your time.