


# Speaking from the margins: An autoethnography of motherhood, culture, gender and criminalisation

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Sinem Bozkurt<sup>1</sup> 

## Abstract

A growing body of research offers valuable insights into the experiences of women, mothers, and racially minoritised individuals in prison. However, much of this work relies on second-hand accounts, filtered through researchers' perspectives, leaving participants largely excluded from the processes of analysis and interpretation. This article examines the imprisonment experience of a Turkish mother through an intersectional lens, addressing intersecting layers of marginalisation related to gender, motherhood, culture, and prisoner status. Using an autoethnographic approach, the researcher blends personal narrative with existing scholarship to offer a nuanced analysis. The paper fills a critical gap in prison studies by integrating culture, gender, and parenthood alongside prisoner status, amplifying the voices of marginalised women often overlooked in mainstream criminology.

## Keywords

Gender, motherhood, imprisonment, culture, race, sentencing

## Introduction

This article examines the intersectionality of gender, motherhood, culture, and prisoner status through the author's personal experience of imprisonment in the United Kingdom (Baldry, 2010; Easterling et al., 2021). Notably, the author was a prison officer before her imprisonment, and while this period will be briefly discussed in the autoethnography, the primary focus will be the other intersecting factors. The aim is to enhance understanding of how minoritised mothers

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<sup>1</sup>University of Westminster, London, UK

### Corresponding author:

Sinem Bozkurt, University of Westminster, London, UK.  
Email: [S.bozkurt1@westminster.ac.uk](mailto:S.bozkurt1@westminster.ac.uk)

experience imprisonment and the contributing factors. Themes such as gender, male dominance, power, liberation, and injustice will be explored. This article considers the value of autoethnography in providing an “insider perspective” on the gendered, maternal, and cultural experiences of imprisonment through personal narratives, highlighting the distinct inadequacies that exist within the criminal justice system.

A key theme that runs through this discussion is stigma, which plays a significant role in shaping how imprisoned women, particularly minoritised mothers, are perceived and treated. Goffman (1963) conceptualises stigma as a mark of disgrace that discredits an individual’s identity, positioning them as outsiders in society. Tyler (2020) expands on this, arguing that stigma is not merely an individual experience, but a form of social control used to marginalise and oppress vulnerable groups. In the context of women’s imprisonment, stigma operates at multiple levels – socially, culturally, and institutionally – reinforcing the perception of criminalised women as undeserving and morally deviant. Stigma within the prison system, particularly for women facing intersectional challenges, is a crucial aspect of this discussion.

### *Women’s imprisonment and intersectional challenges*

Research indicates that women entering prison often have complex needs, shaped by disadvantaged backgrounds and severe hardships (Baldwin and Quinlan, 2018). These include histories of poverty, mental health issues, and/or substance use (Barnes and Stringer, 2014; Burgess and Flynn, 2013; Corston, 2007; Easterling et al., 2018; Imber-Black, 2008; Siegel, 2011). Many women’s involvement in crime is linked to their social, financial, and political circumstances (Arditti and Few, 2006; Beresford et al., 2020). These preexisting vulnerabilities are often exacerbated by prison experiences, rendering these marginalised women even more invisible and disposable in society’s eyes (Allen et al., 2010). As Allen et al. (2010: 161) note, ‘these women, as vulnerable as they are, are often poorly served by the very system that should be helping them’.

Much of the current literature, however, examines individual identities, such as gender, race, or class, in isolation (Enos, 1998; Ginn, 2013; Mirza, 2003). This approach neglects the interconnectedness of identities and their combined effects on individuals’ life experiences, highlighting the urgent need for intersectionality. This term was coined by Crenshaw (1989, 1991) to describe the structural, political, and symbolic aspects of oppression, particularly in her studies of Black women’s experiences with employment, domestic violence, and rape. Crenshaw (1991) specifically focused on violence against women of colour to illuminate the multiple layers of disadvantage they face. She argues that many women of colour, in addition to being victims of violence, must also contend with poverty, motherhood responsibilities, and a lack of education and job skills. These challenges, she states, are ‘the consequence of gender and class oppression’ (Crenshaw, 1991: 2). In her essay discussing intervention strategies used by shelters to support battered women, Crenshaw (1991) contends that ‘strategies based solely on the experiences of women who do not share the same class or race backgrounds will be of limited utility for those whose lives are shaped by a different set of obstacles’ (Crenshaw, 1991: 3). This perspective is comparable to the traditional feminist movement, which often centres solely on male dominance while overlooking the socio-economic and cultural factors that further disempower marginalised women (Beasley, 1999).

This is echoed by Collins and Bilge (2020: 2), who argue that intersectionality’s core insight is that power relations of race, class, and gender are integral elements of any given society at any point in time and are not distinct or mutually exclusive. Consequently, although these intersecting power

relations may be invisible, they affect every aspect of the social world. For example, an individual might be a Black woman from a working-class background, encapsulating the intersection of multiple forms of disadvantage (Joseph, 2006). Mirza (2003) emphasises the importance of understanding these intersections, employing Black feminist and postcolonial frameworks to illuminate the invisibility of minoritised women in Britain. She contends that focusing solely on gender or ethnicity reinforces stereotypes and overlooks the holistic, multifaceted identities of these women. Garner (2010) expands on this by critiquing universalist generalisations, observing that White women's experiences frequently dominate research, overshadowing the cultural and structural disparities encountered by women from other ethnic background groups.

Motherhood adds another layer of complexity, with societal ideals often favouring a middle-class, educated mother with access to time, money, and social support (Allen et al., 2010; Ferraro and Moe, 2003). These ideals disregard the realities faced by marginalised mothers, who may struggle with poverty, mental health issues, or substance misuse (Berry and Eigenberg, 2003; Easterling et al., 2018). Baldwin (2017) highlights the emotional power of motherhood and societal judgments that disproportionately label marginalised mothers as inadequate. Aiello and McQueeney (2016) further note that definitions of good motherhood vary across cultures, with some prioritising full-time caregiving and others emphasising professional achievement. For example, South Asian and Muslim communities often expect women to prioritise homemaking, while mothers from these communities, like Black mothers, must also navigate the additional challenge of preparing their children for a racist society (Buncy and Ahmed, 2014; Chigwada-Bailey, 2003).

For imprisoned mothers, these challenges are amplified. Separation from their children can cause profound emotional distress for both mother and child (O'Reilly, 2016). Mothers often face the dual burden of navigating imprisonment while worrying about their children's well-being and their loss of influence in their children's lives (Halperin and Harris, 2004; Harris, 2017). Contact is limited, especially for those with children in statutory care, further straining bonds (Corston, 2007; Lockwood, 2018). Only 5% of children remain in their family homes when their mothers are imprisoned, with the majority placed in the care of relatives or social services (Minson et al., 2015).

Minoritised mothers in prison face additional layers of oppression. They encounter racial discrimination, stigma, and cultural pressures, often compounded by language barriers and limited employment opportunities (Corston, 2007; Cardale et al., 2017). Joseph (2006) notes that these intersecting disadvantages render minoritised women among the most marginalised groups in society. Cox and Sack-Jones (2017) study highlights the silencing of minoritised women in the criminal justice system, revealing issues such as subconscious racial bias during sentencing, stigma within their communities, and isolation within the prison.

Muslim women, in particular, face cultural pressures that further complicate their prison experiences. Buncy and Ahmed (2014) found that Muslim women are often perceived as bringing shame and dishonour to their families, leading to fractured relationships and post-release isolation. Their follow-up study (Muslim Hands, 2018) confirmed these findings, highlighting themes of shame, discrimination, and ostracism. Families may sever ties entirely, exacerbating the women's isolation during and after imprisonment. The concept of honour in South Asian Muslim cultures adds to this complexity, as women's imprisonment is perceived as defaming the family's reputation and social standing (Buncy and Ahmed, 2019). These experiences vary, depending on cultural and religious interpretations, but the internalisation of shame often leaves long-term psychological scars.

While there is limited research into the prison experiences of minoritised mothers, this autoethnography does not seek to fill this gap, as a single study cannot fully address such a complex issue.

Instead, it aims to contribute a personal, nuanced perspective to the broader conversation, offering insights into the lived realities of motherhood in these contexts. This narrative seeks to encourage deeper understanding and inspire further research that builds on and complements this work.

## **Making space for lived experience**

Much has been written in various social scientific domains on the blurring of professional and personal identities in research, and a recognition that ethnography is always somewhat autobiographical has emerged. However, these arguments often come from traditional criminological viewpoints that maintain dominant discourses by systematically preventing research that challenges the status quo (Aresti et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the importance of lived experience in the criminal justice system – whether in academia, policy, or service provision – has gained increasing recognition. Schreeche-Powell (2025) addresses the complex identity challenges faced by individuals with lived experiences, particularly highlighting the difficulty of balancing professional and personal identities in both academic and public settings. The process of identity enactment – how individuals navigate and present themselves in different social contexts – can be especially challenging for those with stigma-associated characteristics, such as a criminal conviction.

Adding to these challenges, the collateral consequences of a criminal conviction extend well beyond the immediate sentence. Corda and Kasper (2022) explore these repercussions in both the United States and Germany, revealing how legal, social, and institutional barriers continue to impact the lives of formerly incarcerated individuals long after their formal punishment has concluded. These restrictions, which can include employment bans and social ostracism, serve as lasting markers of criminalisation and limit the ability of individuals to fully reintegrate into society.

One specific network privileging the voices of former prisoners is Convict Criminology (CC). This is the study of crime and prisons conducted by several ex-convict academics who have substantial knowledge of the criminal justice system, alongside several non-convict academics who share the same ideologies (Aresti et al., 2016). Convict criminology privileges lived experiences, but from an insider perspective of those that are generally silenced. Jones et al. (2009) posit that people in prisons and those with criminal convictions are one of the most marginalised and excluded cohorts who have been subject to legal and social prejudices for many decades, and it is, therefore, significant to give them a voice. Taking a critical stance on the traditional studies of crime and criminal justice, Richards and Ross (2003) contend that such an approach has predominantly resulted in disjointed research and analysis by academics with no real knowledge of crime, punishment, and prisons.

Although Convict Criminology has successfully amplified the voices of those with firsthand experiences of imprisonment, it remains predominantly male-centric, prioritising men's accounts and experiences (Aresti and Darke, 2016; Cox and Malkin, 2023). As a result, the voices of more marginalised groups, particularly women and individuals from minoritised backgrounds, have often been overlooked (Belknap, 2015; Owens, 2010). Ross et al. (2011) argue that the absence of women in the field is not simply a matter of neglect; rather, women may find it more challenging to openly identify as ex-convicts. Additionally, they highlight that women often face greater difficulties transitioning from prison to academia due to their caregiving responsibilities, as many are primary caregivers of children. Aresti and Darke (2016) further explain that this absence is linked to broader social and structural constraints that impact women's ability to participate in the field.

Tietjen and Kavish (2021) introduce the concept of “status fragility” to describe the precarious situation faced by convict criminologists, whose professional legitimacy is constantly undermined by their past convictions. This fragility is further intensified for women and racially marginalised individuals, who also have to deal with gendered and racialised forms of exclusion both within academia and beyond, which may cause some to hesitate in voicing their experiences. Nonetheless, Cox and Malkin (2023) emphasise the need to focus on the experiences of system-involved women within the discipline of Convict Criminology from an intersectional perspective, particularly examining how gender intersects with race, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

## Research from the inside: Using autoethnography

Autoethnography combines personal narrative with cultural analysis to offer deeper insights into lived experiences. It is defined as ‘a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context’ and functions as both a method and a text (Reed-Danahay, 1997: 6). By blending autobiography and ethnography, it uses personal experiences to explore broader cultural meanings (Ettorre, 2005). Central to this method are epiphanies – life events with profound impacts – which help frame personal narratives within their social and cultural contexts.

Unlike traditional research methods that prioritise neutrality and objectivity, autoethnography foregrounds subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher’s influence on the study. Charmaz and Mitchell (1996: 285) criticise the longstanding expectation for scholars to ‘emulate Victorian children: be seen (in the credits) not heard (in the text)’. Autoethnography challenges this by placing the researcher at the centre of the study, providing authentic and nuanced insights into human experiences (Ellis et al., 2011).

This method is particularly relevant in prison-related studies, as Maruna (2017) highlights in his work on desistance. He emphasises the value of including the voices of former prisoners, whose lived experiences can provide unique insights into reintegration and desistance that are often overlooked in traditional research. Autoethnography ensures that research is not only informed by lived realities but also rooted in them (Aresti et al., 2016), connecting individual narratives to broader historical, cultural, and political contexts (Denzin, 2014).

Building on this, Schreeche-Powell (2025) draws attention to the limited study of academic insecurity among professional academics, particularly in the context of Convict Criminologists. He presents autoethnography as a powerful scholarly tool that enables individuals to analyse and share their lived experiences, linking personal reflections to self-identity, cultural norms, and socio-political issues. By doing so, this approach not only amplifies marginalised voices but also challenges dominant forms of representation and power within academia. As Earle (2021: 87) states, being a Convict Criminologist means becoming ‘the convict with the prison story and the criminologist with the academic telling’.

Critics often argue that autoethnography’s reliance on the researcher’s perspective leads to bias and limited generalisability. However, subjectivity is also its strength, offering rich and reflective insights that more “objective” methods may overlook (Ellis et al., 2011). Reflexivity and transparency ensure the narrative’s credibility while acknowledging the researcher’s influence on the study. Furthermore, ethical concerns, particularly relational ethics (Lapadat, 2017), that being the researcher’s family and social network being implicated in the study, are mitigated by the researcher’s ability to control which self-stories to include and how to present them. In this study, early life experiences and post-release narratives were excluded to protect the privacy of others, balancing relational ethics with research integrity.

## **Authors background**

As a mother of two young children from a Turkish background, my journey has been shaped by a combination of personal, professional, and cultural experiences. I earned a BA (Hons) in Criminal Justice from the University of Westminster, after which I worked as a prison officer for a year and a half. This role was a significant part of my professional identity and provided me with unique insights into the criminal justice system from the inside. During my time as a prison officer, though relatively brief, I witnessed the complexities and challenges faced by both prisoners and staff within the system. This experience profoundly influenced my understanding of justice, authority, and the struggles of those caught in the cycle of incarceration as well as those working within. Overall, it was formative in shaping both my career path and personal outlook.

However, my role as a prison officer came at a personal cost. As I grew more independent and confident in my professional capacity, the tension between my increasing autonomy in the workplace and my partner's escalating jealousy and control became more pronounced. This conflict led to the eventual end of a decade-long abusive relationship. During this time, I also faced cultural stigmas as a single mother from a Turkish background and financial struggles that were compounded by my personal circumstances. The pressures from my professional and personal life ultimately led to a moment of vulnerability. Struggling with debt, I succumbed to the pressure of a prisoner offering financial incentives to smuggle illegal items, which resulted in my arrest, 10 months on bail, and eventual sentencing. Despite my efforts to rebuild my life through academic pursuits – pursuing a master's in criminology and being accepted into a PhD program – I faced media scrutiny and political pressure that led to my suspended sentence being overturned to that of 2 years 8 months in custody.

This autoethnography seeks to explore the intersections of my experiences as a mother, a woman, a prisoner, and a prison officer. The tensions between my role within the criminal justice system and my personal struggles offer a lens through which I examine the broader social, cultural, and institutional forces at play. By reflecting on these experiences, I hope to provide insights into the challenges faced by individuals in the criminal justice system, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds.

## **Data analysis**

The data for this article was collected through an interview conducted by my colleague, who is well-known to me. This ensured a comfortable, bias-free environment, free from concerns about power imbalances or discomfort in sharing personal experiences. Although I kept a diary during my time in prison, it did not provide enough detail about the entire journey. The interview aimed to support me in recalling significant events, focusing on gender, culture, and motherhood while limiting the findings to these themes and discarding irrelevant details that did not align with the article's purpose.

To analyse the data, I employed a combination of autoethnography and thematic analysis (TA). Autoethnography not only framed the research process but also shaped the analytical approach by prioritising lived experience as a critical lens (Ellis et al., 2011). Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), provided a structured yet flexible framework to systematically identify patterns and meanings within the data. Rather than treating TA as a rigid step-by-step process, I engaged with it reflexively, recognising that meaning-making in qualitative research is iterative rather than linear.

Following an autoethnographic coding approach (Hughes and Pennington, 2017), I identified significant events, metaphors, and emotions that resonated with the study's focus. As I coded the data, emerging themes began to surface – some anticipated, others unexpected. Instead of strictly listing the six phases of TA (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Clarke and Braun, 2013), I engaged in an organic, recursive process of coding, refining, and deepening my interpretation. While familiarisation with the data is typically the first stage of TA, in this case, my immersion in the narrative meant that this phase naturally overlapped with the data collection itself. The final themes were presented in the form of reflective dialogues, offering a layered and dynamic representation of the experience.

## Findings

Each theme follows a temporal path that begins with my pre-prison experiences and then focuses on my time in prison. The first theme, **finding power in a male dominated environment**, captures my struggles to acquire independence and escape abuse which comes with frequent setbacks. **The fragmentation of motherhood** concentrates on my maternal identity and the struggles relating to my children. **Cultural stigma and the weight of shame** highlight the heightened shame and stigma attached to my criminalisation.

### *Finding power in a male-dominated environment*

The initial sense of gaining power after a long period of powerlessness came when I joined the prison service while still with the father of my children. Reflecting on this period, it's clear that my new role gave me a level of authority and control I had not experienced before. However, this newfound power also intensified the dynamics of control in my personal life.

*So at this point, I had been with my children's dad for eight years now. And I started the prison service in 2015, and obviously all the abuse and everything was still ongoing with him, or by him actually. But it got even worse because now I was working in a male prison, I had a little more voice, I was now controlling people. I now had power. And he [former partner] didn't like this because I was no longer obeying him. I was a busy person, I was now working, I wasn't the typical partner that I would have been before.*

This tension between personal and professional roles quickly escalated. My job, which was supposed to empower me, became a point of contention in my relationship, triggering further abuse from my former partner.

*It started getting out of hand and he was being very horrible, very jealous... and I basically told him to fuck off. Obviously, he didn't, he stayed there, he refused to leave and got worse. He would come in the middle of the night drunk and try it on me. I'd wake up and my pyjamas are off, I'd wake up, he's just trying to do things... have sex, like I'm a plastic doll. You know? No consent was required...*

This moment reveals a stark contradiction: while I was gaining power professionally, my sense of autonomy was simultaneously being undermined in my personal life. By refusing to leave and trying to perform sexual acts against my will, my former partner was aiming to maintain or exercise the position of power he initially had. Despite this, I managed to end the relationship. However, this decision brought new challenges.

*Anyway eventually it got even worse [the abuse] so yeah, I finished it [with former partner] and whatever. But then I got debts piling up. So I can't even, I can no longer go into work properly because he [former partner] was refusing to look after the kids. We got tonnes of loans and everything which he is refusing to help me out with because he is saying "oh let's see that independent woman that you want to be."*

This phase highlighted how societal structures and expectations can fail women who are trying to break free from abusive situations. When I sought support at work, I was met with limited understanding and insufficient assistance.

*So then I went into work and told my governor. He just reduced my hours at work and then he gave me a charity card and said call them see if they can help you. Obviously, no charity helped me. And although they knew mentally, I was now a mess, they put me back on the wing and turned surveillance onto me.*

Foucault (1975) describes how prisons are structured to regulate both prisoners and staff through surveillance and control. Institutions do not just exert power over prisoners; they also shape the behaviours of those who enforce the rules. My initial sense of authority was part of a larger system that ultimately controlled me as well. Foucault (1975) discusses how surveillance serves as a tool of discipline, making individuals feel watched and constrained. In my case, instead of empowering and supporting me, the system used its power to monitor me, reinforcing my vulnerability rather than addressing it. The combination of reduced hours, increasing debt, and emotional distress left me feeling powerless. To regain control over my life and finances, I made decisions that I later realised were driven by desperation. My actions during this time, although seemingly empowering on the surface, were ultimately another manifestation of powerlessness.

*So I went to the prison, I went straight to the door of the guy that was telling me you can make money and I said to him "okay how are we doing this?" However, I said I need the money now... and yeah, that's how it started. It went on for about 5 or 6 months [smuggling drugs]. Obviously, my kid's dad is getting even worse, he is stalking me, he is following me around, he still has keys you know... I could not even think about changing the lock because he would break my door down.*

At the time, I believed I was in control, even relishing the sense of authority I had over prisoners.

*What I liked about those six months was the power I felt... the guys in the prison, the prisoners weren't able to do anything without me. I was the key, I was the plug, it was me if you get what I mean...*

But in hindsight, I can see that this power was illusory. My vulnerability and desperation were being exploited by others. Women engaged in organised crime, including trafficking and smuggling, can assume both passive, subordinate roles and more active, powerful positions. However, in various forms of organised crime, the distinction between victims and perpetrators is often unclear. This ambiguity arises from a lack of understanding regarding women's roles, motivations, and life experiences (Selmini, 2020).

*Now I know there was actually no power at all. I was the most powerless, I was the naïve one, the one that was exploited because they all used my vulnerability of course.*



This period taught me that perceived power is not always genuine power. The dynamics in the prison were just another way in which I was being controlled, this time by a system that preyed on my circumstances. This echoes Foucault's (1975) idea that power is not always where we think it is – it is diffuse and pervasive.

### *The fragmentation of motherhood*

My children were at the forefront of all my concerns and emotions throughout the journey. My former partner is where it all started. My determination to leave was inspired by the abuse I witnessed my son endure:

*...he [former partner] was horrible to my children too. Very horrible, he was nasty, he would shout and be abusive. He would silence my son, he would always put pressure on him you know 'don't cry. Be a man, be a man' I mean you're talking to a six-year-old child... So one day, my son was playing games on my laptop and I made the food. I put it on the table and my son said 'five minutes, ten minutes I'm coming' whatever he didn't want to leave his game. And this man went and smashed the laptop... he told my son to come to the table and sit down. Now we are all sitting at the table, I can see in my son's face he is going completely red because he is dying to cry but he can't because the dad's going to get angrier and that was the moment something snapped in me. Long story short I lost it, I threw the broken laptop at him and I... I just lost the plot and I said, 'You have done whatever you have done to me all these years but you are not doing it to my child. You are not doing that to my child ever'. That's the moment I truly finished it and there was no going back. Never.*

This led to a battle for survival, which resulted in me resorting to unlawful activity (Berry and Eigenberg, 2003), when all else failed (Baldwin, 2017). Despite being 'dismissed as a throw away mum' (Allen et al., 2010: 162), I was attempting to successfully carry out my motherly obligations and responsibilities, which became difficult owing to poverty and voicelessness. This is detailed below:

*I had to provide for my kids and I had to pay my rent and the other debts too. I was drowning. They also reduced my hours at work because I had no childcare and simply couldn't go in most days. Funnily enough with the rest of the money I got from the drugs, I took my kids out. I took them to Legoland, to the Disney store, to everywhere I couldn't before. I was never able to do anything and for that, I used to always blame myself. Also for ending up with a man who was their dad and you know obviously the things he put my son through... I'm trying to go back to that time. I just wanted them to be happy and especially where I grew up with nothing but restrictions...*

From the moment of arrest until the final court hearing, my children were always at the forefront of all discussions. The narrative below depicts my sentencing hearing at the crown court:

**SB:** *I never looked up. I was ashamed, I was so ashamed and every time they talked about my children, I just wanted to be buried somewhere.*

**AA:** *But why? So they're talking about your children, and what you've done...*

**SB:** *Because my barrister is saying 'She's got children and that needs to be taken into consideration' and the judge is saying 'Well that was her duty, she hasn't considered her children, she hasn't cared about their welfare. It's not down to the court to do this'.*

**AA:** *So what did it make you feel?*

**SB:** *Made me feel shit, like the most worthless [pauses] I couldn't even call myself a mother in that moment. You just lose...you just completely lose it. It's almost like my children were in the dock with me because the conversations that went back and forth between the prosecutor, my barrister, and the judge was a lot to do with my children. Debates on what should happen and whether or not it should be the courts duty to care, I now had no power and it was up to these three people to decide what was going to happen to me and my children, I had no power at all. Mothering was stripped off me. My abilities and capabilities as a mother was questioned. You know, in court, the question was 'Why didn't you think about your children'? And every time someone hits you with that... I mean they are an extension of you, It's like you can't even separate them from what you've done. You know it's, it's kind of combined. I think, thinking back, yeah, they were probably in the dock with me, and they definitely paid the price too. Throughout the hearing I was frozen all the way through and my head was down. But then when he was going to sentence me and he made me stand up. As soon as he said go home to your children, I burst into tears. It's like I wasn't breathing until that moment. From the minute I walked into dock, till that moment I don't think I was breathing and the minute he said go home to your children, it was just the word children you know, it's crazy how that takes over everything else.*

**AA:** *So how did you feel when he said go to children?*

**SB:** *I burst into tears and I just wanted to do exactly that. Go home to my children!*

The judge in my case at the Crown Court clearly considered the welfare of my children. Although he remarked that “*it should not be the court's duty to think about the welfare of the children,*” he imposed a sentence that allowed me to return home. This decision was later appealed, leading me to the Court of Appeal. In that court, the Appeal judges acknowledged my children but ultimately placed the blame on me:

**SB:** *Yeah, they said that children should not be used as a trump card to avoid jail.*

**AA:** *How did that make you feel?*

**SB:** *Horrible right. I never used my children, if anything, I committed the crime for my children. But anyway, as I heard two years, eight months. That's when everything just hit me and straight away, I kinda poked my barrister and I said, 'My children. My children, what the fuck'? And then my barrister quickly said, 'You know her children are in school, there's no one to pick them up'.*

The judges concluded that the initial sentencing judge had been unduly lenient because I had children. Consequently, the initial decision was overturned to that of 2 years 8 months custodial. I was however, allowed to return home for four days to sort out my childcare and had to surrender at my local police station on a given date and time:

**SB:** *So I I dropped them off [ my children]at the reception at the school. The school knew what was happening. Everyone was aware that I was going [to prison] and obviously I kissed them goodbye and I told them again that I have to go. They were tearful. They were crying. And when they were*

walking away, it felt like I was never going to see them again. I couldn't see beyond the sentence at the time. I couldn't see beyond it, for me, that was it. I just lost my children. That's how I saw it. I lost them.

**AA:** What was it like losing your children?

**SB:** I don't think I could describe that. You can't describe that. They are an extension of you. Anything that involves them destroys you. That was the end of me, you know, and it does become the end of you because they are physically removed from you. They are your world and your world just collapses and my world collapsed. When they walked off, when they entered the school and walked away, my world collapsed.

**AA:** Who was with you when you were dropping the kids?

**SB:** My mum was there and my mum could feel the pain too because she was also about to let go of her daughter. Yeah, so we were both having the same kind of feelings of losing.

Whilst my mother's way of coping when I walked into prison was unknown to me, my own strategy was to block my children out of my thoughts:

**SB:** But I immediately blocked them out. Because it's almost like... How can I put it? When you sense danger and you desperately try to find a way out of it, it was almost like my body, my brain just shut down completely. That was my coping mechanism. My brain just shut down and I had to block them out. I was trying my best not to think of them. Where it was at the back of my head, immediately from when I surrendered, I was always very fearful of bringing them to the front or to actually allow myself to think about them or even to process the situation. I was scared of what I was capable of doing to myself. This is something I've never ever felt before. I was so scared of what I could do to myself. The damage I could do to myself if I didn't block them out, I had to keep my sanity. To remain sane, really, because I could have lost it.

**AA:** So basically what you're saying is that your brain avoids the pain?

**SB:** Yes, yes avoids the pain and that was my way of avoiding the pain. I was able to control my brain and the way I was thinking I was able to control it, but what I was always thinking about is that not everyone is the same. I really can see why there was self-harming, why they were attempting suicide because it's crazy, you know, especially when you, when you have your children who you've, you know who you gave birth to, you've raised, you've been by their side through the nights you know. I mean, we all know how parenting is. I don't need to lay it out. To go from that within 5 minutes to nothing at all, not knowing what they're doing, what they are eating and where are they going to be. I mean, even though you know these things, you still don't know. You can't stop the anxiety. So yeah, my way was to block them out... My mind is 100 miles an hour. I've got like 10 boxes in my brain and I'm taking turns in checking each and trying to deal with them but the only box I'm not opening is the one with my children.

The dialogue above expresses a wide range of emotions, many of which point to incomprehensible maternal pain (Baldwin, 2021). With reference to 'boxes', I talk about being able to think about and comprehend, the situation I am in, apart from the thought of my children. This was

my coping strategy. Although I was fearful of dealing with the intense grief as a result of the loss of my children, the situation made me understand why some mothers in that position self-harm.

### **Cultural stigma and the weight of shame**

The notions of shame and dishonour appeared to be significant in my experience. In the dialogue below, I recall my thoughts whilst with the investigating officers immediately after my arrest:

**SB:** ...and then as I said when they [the police officers] were in the car and I got out and I was smoking a cigarette, the officer was like, 'Listen don't worry you know some girl was caught doing this and now she works in rehabilitation doing this with offenders doing this, this person does that you know you'll be fine, you know. You haven't murdered anyone, you're going to be okay. We are just going to interview you and send you home, life goes on'. But I'm not thinking about I'll find another job, I'm just thinking about how am I going to face these people you know?

**AA:** The community?

**SB:** Yeah and I am thinking about the kid's dad. What is he going to do? His family, what are they going to do? I mean they use to go crazy on me if there wasn't enough salt in the food and to find out, what if they take the kids off me?

**AA:** Even though you are not with him?

**SB:** Yeah but I'm still his. I'm almost still belonging to him because he does not understand, it seems like no one around me understands I don't want him, I don't want him.

**AA:** So are you worried about what's going to happen with the kids?

**SB:** Yeah. I was really worried about what's going to happen to the kids...But also how am I going to live with this shame, how am I going to live with this very stain that my mum was always talking about, drilling it into my head. She would say, 'Don't leave permanent stains you can't get rid of' and this was definitely a permanent stain. How am I going to get back from this? How am I going to face people again? How am I going to be normal again? and go into anything cultural? I couldn't see it happening. Within minutes this is all I am thinking about. It's crazy, I have been caught, I have been with investigating officers, taken to the police station and not at one point am I thinking what's going to happen to me. What's the system going to do to me? I don't care about the system, I'm not worried about the judge that I will have to face. I worry about going back home...

**AA:** To the community?

**SB:** To the community yeah. This wasn't family or community, this was wider than that, this was bigger than that, and I think that's what scared me even more. How am I going to face people? You know people are going to be hearing about this, I have taken in drugs, as a woman, as a mother of two kids you know fuck the public, it's the community, it's my people, it's the Turkish people you know. How's my dad going to keep his head up? It was the stain... I had a permanent stain. A criminal and separated. Single with two kids, a mess. That's how they saw it. I was now a lost cause, a hopeless case. I was just so cornered and so ashamed and so isolated.

In parallel with many other honour-based cultures (Gill, 2004), women and girls are regulated under patriarchal principles in traditional Turkish-Kurdish family contexts, notably in the form of regulating and constraining autonomy (Yalcin, 2000). Given a mother's responsibility to raise her children, a daughter's misbehaviour is perceived to be the result of a mother's failure to properly nurture her child/ren (Abudi, 2010). Mothers are judged by both their community and extended family. The wrongdoing of the daughter, as well as the apparent inability of the mother to raise her child correctly, leads to the loss of both the family's honour and reputation (Tas-Cifci, 2019).

Although I showed concern for my dad's honour and reputation during the interview, it is suggested that the effect of having a 'disgraced' daughter is usually very detrimental for the mothers (Tas-Cifci, 2019). Whilst the negative behaviour of a mother affects her female children (Gill, 2004), a daughter's wrongdoing tarnishes the mother. Despite this, there appears strong cultural emphasis on maintaining the male honour, which runs through the female. This is also evident in the treatment of male prisoners/former prisoners in non-western cultures in comparison to their female counterparts. My and my brother's prison experiences demonstrate this:

*I mean for years my brother was at...probably toured for years every police station in London and I remember when growing up me and mum was always bailing him out of everywhere. But that was never a big deal but obviously with me it was very different. Gender is a key factor, but it's not the only one. My brother has been to prison twice. He's never had to carry that shame or the extended stigma in the community. He's never had to keep his head down. It was openly spoken about and all more acceptable, but then when it's a woman, it's so shameful that people don't even ask you. I've been out in my community for five years and I don't think anyone has ever actually directly asked me about my prison experience. The word prison never comes up in our conversations. It wouldn't come up, so forbidden, so shameful. But there is the talks in the background of course.*

Although myself and my brother shared a similar experience of imprisonment, the burden of shame laid on me.

## Discussion

Overall, the findings underline the multiple layers of pain and burden the author faced in a system that is both racist and sexist, compounded further by a patriarchal culture that governed her life and choices. While scholars have predominantly focused on one or two aspects of identity, such as gender and race or race and class (Garner, 2010), this study emphasises the necessity of adopting an intersectional perspective. An intersectional approach recognises that such identities cannot be treated as isolated or sequential variables but must instead be understood as interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Collins and Bilge (2020) argue that intersectionality provides a powerful lens for 'understanding and analysing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human interaction' (p. 11). This theoretical framework moves beyond surface-level categorisations, offering a way to understand the compounded nature of discrimination and its varied impacts.

The author's experiences reveal patriarchy, cultural stigma, and challenges as a mother in prison. Her role as a prison officer initially gave her authority but also triggered her former partner's abusive behaviour, reflecting Anderson and Umberson's (2001) view that male coercion maintains power when threatened. Institutional shortcomings also increased here challenges. When she sought help from her employer, the lack of support revealed a tendency to police rather than assist individuals in crisis. Instead of meaningful interventions, the author's request triggered increased scrutiny,

echoing Selmini's (2020) findings on the blurred lines between agency and victimisation in women's roles within organised crime. While her criminal actions were portrayed as a choice, they were responses to systemic inequities and personal exploitation. Selmini (2020) also highlights that women in organised crime often occupy roles that appear powerful but ultimately reinforce their vulnerabilities. These roles frequently involve coercion and manipulation, particularly under economic pressure. The experiences of these women illustrate how structural inequalities and gendered expectations expose them to exploitation and criminalisation, thereby perpetuating cycles of marginalisation. This situation is further compounded by the influence of patriarchy, which is defined by Hunnicutt (2009) as a social and ideological construct in which men are perceived as superior to women.

Patriarchy is deeply ingrained in the norms, attitudes, and practices of many non-Western countries, where women are often regarded and treated as inferior to men. This dynamic fosters male leadership, dominance, and power, reinforcing the vulnerabilities faced by women in various contexts, including organised crime. Partners or husbands who display toxic masculinity and wield power and authority to oppress women are seen as culturally acceptable. According to Hofstede (1980), this is a masculine society that relegates women to economic dependency, abuse, and domestication. Consequently, gender inequality and sexism are pervasive in such societies, significantly influencing various institutions, including marriage and family. Notably, 'man-made' patriarchal systems are deeply embedded in several cultures and are arguably the primary obstacle to women's advancement. This is echoed in my narrative relating to my former partner and his attempts to control me.

Moving on, the author recounted her prison experience, which was filled with the excruciating pain of separation from my children. Previous research has emphasised that women face far worse conditions in prison than men (Corston, 2007), not only because they are housed in facilities designed by and for men (Minson et al., 2015), but also because they suffer more from the stigma of imprisonment (Baldwin, 2021). This is because they are believed to have broken not only the criminal law but also social norms too and are additionally stigmatised for breaking gendered 'codes' of appropriate behaviour for women (Malloch and Mcivor, 2011). However, it is documented that this stigma is amplified for women with children as there is the societal tendency to view them as unfit and indifferent mothers (Allen et al., 2010; Kauffman, 2001), resulting in 'double jeopardy' (Easterling, 2014). Given that motherhood is such an important aspect of both the mother's and child's lives (O'Reilly, 2016), being an imprisoned mother is more than likely to inflict major emotional harm to both.

Racial and cultural stigma further isolates minoritised mothers and women. Tas-Cifci (2019) examined the honour code from the standpoint of Turkish and Kurdish mothers and daughters. She highlighted that the daughters in the study frequently stated that the males in their families were treated differently and were more independent, but the girls were constantly monitored to protect the family's good name. Both the mothers and daughters also mentioned that the Turkish-Kurdish community played a significant role in judging families' reputation and honour and women were at the centre of the judgement, since honour is so closely associated with them. Although the notion of honour applies to both men and women in several cultures, men's honour is more likely to be tarnished by the wrongful behaviour of the women in their family rather than their own (Sen, 2005).

## **Conclusion**

This paper utilised autoethnography to explore how the author negotiated and made sense of both cultural and wider structural, patriarchally driven notions that governed her, and how these systems

influenced the way the journey of imprisonment was experienced. This study was significant because previous research has often concentrated on either/or one component of an individual's identity, overlooking that it is a mix of numerous identities that distinguish each individual. Given this, little empirical attention has been devoted to how several identities may overlap to aggravate a person's already disadvantaged status. The paper addresses this significant gap by assigning equal weight to prisoner status, culture, gender and parental status. It also contributes to a gap in convict criminology of absent voices, that being women, and more specifically, minoritised women. More broadly, it seeks to break the cycle of male-dominated prison studies that favour men's perspectives and women-centred research that ignores racialised experiences by breaking the silence that has persisted for far too long. Further research is needed to explore the prison experiences of minoritised mothers through an intersectional lens. This approach will enhance our understanding of their marginalisations and help provide effective support during their reintegration.


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### ORCID iD

Sinem Bozkurt  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5240-6083>

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