

# Incarcerated Mothers: Role Strain and the Redefining of Mothers' Roles

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## Abstract

The experiences of incarcerated mothers within the criminal justice system have gained increasing attention due to the profound implications for both the mothers themselves and their young children. One prominent, but less-studied, challenge is role strain—the tension and difficulties in reconciling their roles as mothers and prisoners. This article focuses on incarcerated mothers' role strain and the redefining of maternal roles. The research employed mixed research methods, including structured face-to-face interviews with 52 incarcerated mothers in a provincial prison in Thailand; and in-depth interviews with 20 incarcerated mothers, eight families of incarcerated mothers, their children's caregivers, and their communities. The research found that the role strain of incarcerated mothers stems from various factors, namely mother-child physical separation, limited communication and contact, societal stigmatization, restricted decision-making, and the emotional and mental health challenges associated with incarceration. Despite these challenges, incarcerated mothers have shown resilience and adaptability by redefining their maternal roles within the prison context. This re-definition of maternal roles involves prioritizing emotional support, being involved in children's growth and development, communicating and collaborating with caregivers, and fostering personal growth and self-care. Voices of incarcerated mothers and their children reveal how the redefinition of mothering significantly affects both mothers' and their children's well-being. By examining the impact of mother-child separation, the role strain experienced by incarcerated mothers, and their strategies for redefining maternal roles, this research contributes to the existing literature on incarcerated motherhood and informs the development of supportive interventions.

**Keywords:** incarcerated mothers, role strain, mother, redefining, prison, justice, criminology

## Introduction

The experiences of incarcerated mothers within the criminal justice system have gained increasing attention due to the profound implications for both the mothers themselves and their young children. Mother-child separation during incarceration has far-reaching consequences for both mothers and their children. The loss of daily contact, physical presence, and active engagement in parenting tasks can be emotionally devastating for incarcerated mothers (Havanon, et al., 2012; Easterling, 2012; Thongyou, et al., 2018; Parry, 2022). Similarly, young children experience a range of adverse effects, including emotional and post-traumatic distress, behavioral problems—in worse cases anti-social behaviors—and developmental setbacks, when separated from their mothers during crucial stages of their development (Hairston, 2007; Crawford, 2003; Jones, et al., 2013; Murray, Farrington, and Sekol, 2012). The impact of mother-child separation extends beyond the confines of the correctional facility, affecting the well-being of individuals, families, and communities at large (Braman, 2004; Murray, 2005; Hairston, 2007; Chui, 2010; Jones, et al., 2013; Arditti and Johnston, 2020).

One prominent challenge faced by incarcerated mothers is role strain—the tension and difficulties in reconciling their roles as mothers and prisoners. A social role is an expected way of acting for a given social position, in this case, that of a mother. The process of social learning informs individuals how they should perform roles for the status they hold (Ashforth, 2001; Easterling, 2012). The prison environment is not conducive to traditional mothering practices, where mothers are physically present to respond to the physical and emotional needs of young children. Locked behind bars, incarcerated mothers find it arduous to fulfill their parental roles and responsibilities and maintain meaningful relationships with their children (Villanueva and Gayoles, 2019; Parry, 2022). Prison visitation policies further fracture mother-child bonds and exacerbate distress among incarcerated mothers (Berry and Eigenberg, 2003; Havanon et al., 2012; Wattanaporn and Holtfreter, 2014; Thongyou, et al., 2018; Booth, 2020).

This research article focuses on the experiences of incarcerated mothers in a prison in Thailand. Thailand ranks fourth in having the highest number of incarcerated females after the United States, China, and Russia (Thailand Institute of Justice, 2020). Considering the proportion of women inmates in prison per 100,000 population number, Thailand ranks first in the world. The number of female inmates in Thailand has increased rapidly, from 26,321 in 2008 to 48,136 in 2018 (Thailand Institute of Justice, 2020) and 31,428 in May 2023 (Department of Corrections, 2023). A survey on female inmates in Thailand in 2018 conducted with 2,499 inmates (five percent of the total of 42,356 persons) indicated that up to 78 percent of the female inmates are mothers with children, with an average of two. Most (84.4 percent) are under 20 years old (Thailand Institute of Justice, 2020). Unfortunately, the data do not show the percentage of children in lower and most dependent age groups. However, based on this research, we can estimate that the number of female inmates' children aged under 20 years is approximately 55,768. The lack of information on children affected by maternal incarceration indicates a lack of interest and concern for these children as well as the incarcerated mothers and their problems and consequences.

Despite the challenges mentioned above, a number of incarcerated mothers have shown resilience and adaptability by redefining their maternal roles within the prison context (Berry and Eigenberg, 2003; Easterling, 2012; Stringer and Barnes, 2012; Kennedy, Mennicke, and Allen, 2020). By adopting alternative approaches to mothering, incarcerated mothers strive to nurture their children's well-being and establish a sense of connection despite the constraints imposed by the correctional system. This article explores the lived experiences of incarcerated mothers, focusing on the themes of mother-child separation, role strain, and the redefining of maternal roles within the prison setting. By capturing the voices and narratives of incarcerated mothers, we aim to contribute to the existing literature, offering a nuanced perspective on the challenges faced by these women and their efforts to navigate the complexities of motherhood within

the prison setting. In doing so, our goal is to inform interventions, policies, and practices that support and empower incarcerated mothers, facilitate positive mother-child relationships, and mitigate the negative consequences of maternal incarceration. By comprehensively understanding these experiences, we can foster a more compassionate and effective approach to supporting incarcerated mothers and their young children.

### **Research Methodology**

This article is based on exploratory research using a case study of one prison. Udon Thani Central Prison was purposely selected as it is a large facility with inmates sentenced to a maximum term of 30 years, which will help to see both the short and long-term impacts on children. The prison has female inmates within and it is very overcrowded. This research studied female inmates and their children residing in the rural areas of Udon Thani province to control the specific context of the environment of the inmates' children, families, and caregivers. The research began with a study of female inmates to link them to their children, caregivers, and families outside the prison. A mixed method was used to collect and analyze the data, including the following steps.

1) A structured face-to-face questionnaire survey of the demographic characteristics and problems of 52 female inmates, representing 50 percent of 101 female inmates detained in the prison at the time of the study who met the established criteria. The researchers submitted a request for permission to collect research data in the prison from the Udon Thani prison commander, informing him of the inmate screening criteria in advance. On the day of the interview, the prison announced that eligible inmates would come together for interviews. The screening criteria were the following: 1) have Thai nationality, 2) be domiciled outside the municipal area in Udon Thani province, 3) imprisoned in a case that the Court of First Instance has decided, 4) age not over 50, and 6) have children not over the age of 15 who currently reside outside the municipal area in Udon Thani province.

2) After obtaining preliminary information from the structured interview, the researchers made a purposive selection to get the target group to conduct in-depth interviews. Criteria for selection included some of the following challenges: 1) women inmates whose children and families were facing serious difficulties or were high-risk families, such as having children under the age of five or having given birth in prison; 2) their children are living with someone other than their fathers or grandparents; 3) the inmate's grandmother, husband or child caretaker, or a family member has a disability or mental problem; 4) their families are experiencing serious economic problems and/or children's problems such as children dropping out of school while their mothers are detained. We recruited 20 inmates to conduct face-to-face in-depth semi-structured interviews. The interview took about 60 minutes per person and was conducted in a large activity room of the prison where each of the six interviewers could talk with one inmate at a time without disturbance. There was no prison officer present in that room during the interview.

3) After obtaining information from in-depth interviews, the team of six researchers met and selected eight families of female inmates for an in-depth study. The selection criterion was that the family was in severe distress or critical condition according to the same criteria as 2) above. Apart from family, interviews and observations were made with village leaders, religious leaders, school teachers, caregivers, and/or relatives, depending on the nature of the problems faced by the children. Interviews at this stage were conducted in the community where these children reside. As this research is part of a larger project that involves intervention with the family and community, it was possible for us to collect data during several visits over the course of four years.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze quantitative data, i.e., percentage, mean, standard deviation, maximum and minimum values. Content analysis was used for qualitative data analysis.

## Research Results

### Background of Female Inmates

The target group of this research was comprised of female inmates at Udon Thani Central Prison who have children not over the age of 15. It was found that most of the female inmates (59.62 percent) were between 30 and 39 years old. Another 23.08 percent were aged between 20 and 29 years, with an average age of 34. In terms of education, most (40.39 percent) completed elementary-level education (six years of schooling, excluding kindergarten), followed by 34.62 percent completing lower secondary education (nine years of schooling). Regarding marital status, most (71.15 percent) were married or lived with their spouse or partner (Table 1).

**Table 1** Age, level of education, and marital status of incarcerated mothers

Demographic characteristics of female inmates	Number	Percent
<b>Age</b>		
20-29 years	12	23.08
30-39 years	31	59.62
40-49 years	8	15.38
50-59 years	1	1.92
Total	52	100.00
$\bar{X} = 34.00$ , S.D. = 6.59, Min = 20.00, Max = 50.00		
<b>Education level</b>		
Did not study/did not finish primary school	3	5.77
Elementary level	21	40.39
Lower secondary level	18	34.62
Vocational diploma level	0	0.00
Higher vocational diploma level	1	1.92
High school level	8	15.38
Undergraduate degree or higher	1	1.92
Total	52	100.00
<b>Marital status</b>		
Married/live with spouse or partner	37	71.15
Widowed/divorced/separated	15	28.85
Total	52	100.00

Regarding occupation, more than half (55.7 percent) of the inmates' main occupations before imprisonment were farming, followed by 19.23 percent employed as laborers or employees with no regular income. Another 13.46 percent were full-time housewives taking care of children and family. It can be said that most female inmates have poor economic status, in line with the assessment of the economic status by the inmates themselves. One-third of the inmates assessed their own status before being detained as poor and two-thirds assessed it as having enough or moderate.

As many as 59.62 percent of female inmates were the family's main income earners, indicating that their custody has a negative impact on the family economy, as evidenced by the majority of inmates (85 percent) assessing that their current family economic situation has deteriorated since their arrest (Table 2 and Table 3).

**Table 2** Occupation and the status as family earners

Occupation and status as a family earner	Number	Percentage
<b>Main occupation before entering prison</b>		
Farmer	29	55.77
Workers/employees without regular income	10	19.23
Employees with monthly/weekly salary or wage	1	1.92
Government officials	0	0.00
Trade/have own business	4	7.70
Housewife/taking care of children and their own families	7	13.46
No occupation/not working	1	1.92
Studying	0	0.00
Total	52	100.00
<b>Main income earner of the family (before the respondent's imprisonment)</b>		
Herself (female inmates)	31	59.62
Husband/partner	9	17.30
Other people such as parents or children of female inmates	12	23.08
Total	52	100.00

**Table 3** Incarcerated mothers' perception of their family economic status before and after entering prison

Family economic status	Number	Percent
<b>Family economic status before entering prison</b>		
Difficult/poor/shortage	7	35.00
Enough to eat/moderate	13	65.00
Good/living comfortably	0	0.00
Total	20	100.00
<b>Current family economic status (after entering prison)</b>		
Same as before/no change	3	15.00
Worse than before	17	85.00
Better than before	0	0.00
Total	20	100.00

### Becoming Female Inmates

The majority of female inmates (90.39 percent) were arrested for drug charges. Other charges included document forgery, theft, and murder. The murder charge was made against a young single mother who, after long hiding her pregnancy from her parents, delivered her baby in a local hospital, sneaked out, and left her newborn in front of a Buddhist temple. She denied the murder allegations, insisting that her child was alive when she left it there in the hope that someone would adopt it. She was sentenced to 30 years imprisonment.<sup>1</sup>

For the period of imprisonment as sentenced by the court, most (73.08 percent) were sentenced to fewer than five years. The minimum length of imprisonment was 21 months, and the maximum was 372 months (31 years) (mean value equals to 69.65 months or 5.79 years) (Table 4).

<sup>1</sup> She later was granted a royal pardon, and the imprisonment was reduced to eight years. When she later received a second royal pardon, the sentence was reduced to four years.

**Table 4** Offense and duration of the detention of incarcerated mothers

Offense and duration of detention	Number	Percent
<b>Offense</b>		
Narcotics	47	90.39
Forgery of documents	3	5.77
Burglary	1	1.92
Murder	1	1.92
Total	52	100.00
<b>Duration of detention as sentenced by the judge</b>		
Less than 5 years (0-59 months)	38	73.08
5-10 years (60-119 months)	6	11.54
10-15 years (120-179 months)	3	5.77
15-20 years (180-239 months)	1	1.92
20-25 years (240-299 months)	1	1.92
25-30 years (300-359 months)	2	3.85
More than 30 years (360 months or more)	1	1.92
Total	52	100.00
$\bar{X}$ = 69.65, S.D. = 78.58, Min = 21.00, Max = 372.00 months		

### Female Inmates as Mothers

Almost half of the incarcerated mothers in this study (45.15 percent) have two children living outside the prison. Another 28.85 percent have one child, and 7.69 percent have more than four children. Up to 44.23 percent have children under five years old, a highly dependent age group (Table 5). Before incarceration, up to 94.23 percent of the women had their children living with them, under their care. The incarceration thus separated them from their children. After the incarceration, almost half (46.57 percent) had their children living with their parents, 20.55 percent with their husbands, 10.96 percent with their relatives, and 15.07 percent with the parents of their husbands. Unfortunately, up to 2.74 percent had to live with other people who are not related by blood, such as their teacher or a neighbor (Table 6).

Visitation is one of the most important factors that connect incarcerated mothers with their children outside the prison. Data from the interview reveals that 86.54 percent of the mothers used to get visits from their children, though not as frequently as they wished. About one-third of them (34.62 percent) were visited once a month or more, another one-third had a visit once every two to three months, 7.69 percent once every four to six months, and 11.54 percent once a year. Another 11.54 percent have not had any visits at all from their children. However, most of the incarcerated mothers (88.86 percent) expressed their desire to be visited by their children (Table 7).

**Table 5** Number of incarcerated mothers classified by the number of children and children under the age of five

Number of children and children under 5 years	Number	Percent
<b>Number of children</b>		
1 child	15	28.85
2 children	24	46.15
3 children	9	17.31
4 children and over	4	7.69
Total	52	100.00
<b>Has a child/children younger than 5 years old</b>		
Has	23	44.23
Does not have	29	55.77
Total	52	100.00

**Table 6** Number of incarcerated mothers classified by the domicile of children before and after the mother's detention.

Type of domicile	Number	Percent
<b>Domicile of children before mother's incarceration</b>		
Every child lived with the incarcerated mother.	41	78.85
Some lived with the incarcerated mother, others did not.	8	15.38
Lived with other people.	3	5.77
Total	52	100.00



**Table 6** Number of incarcerated mothers classified by the domicile of children before and after the mother's detention. (cont.)

Type of domicile	Number	Percent
<b>Domicile of children after mother's incarceration.</b>		
<b>Children are living with:</b>		
Husband of the inmate	15	20.55
Parent (s) of the inmate	34	46.57
Parent (s) of the inmate's husband	8	10.96
A relative of the inmate	11	15.07
A relative of the inmate's husband	3	4.11
Other people (e.g., a neighbor, a teacher)	2	2.74
Total (multiple answers allowed)	73	100.00

**Table 7** Number of incarcerated mothers classified by the frequency of visits by children

Frequency of visits by children	Number	Percent
<b>Visits by children</b>		
Once a month or more	18	34.62
Once every 2-3 months	17	32.69
Once every 4-5 months	4	7.69
Once a year	6	11.54
No visit at all	7	13.46
Total	52	100.00
<b>How much do you want a visit from your child?</b>		
I want it very much.	31	59.61
I want it.	15	28.85
I'm not sure.	3	5.77
I do not want it.	3	5.77
Total	52	100.00

### Incarcerated Mothers and Role Strain

Role strain, within the context of mothering from prison, refers to the tension and challenges that incarcerated mothers face in fulfilling their

roles as both mothers and prisoners. Incarceration inherently creates an environment not conducive to traditional mothering practices, leading to significant obstacles for mothers in maintaining meaningful relationships with their children and meeting their parenting responsibilities. Berry and Eigenberg (2003) indicated that most incarcerated mothers in their study experienced a high degree of role strain, and felt that they missed out on the pleasures of being a parent. This research found that role strain of the incarcerated mothers stems from various factors, namely physical separation, limited communication and contact, societal stigmatization, restricted decision-making, and the emotional and mental health challenges associated with incarceration.

#### 1. Physical separation

The physical separation of incarcerated mothers from their young children is one of the primary sources of role strain. Being physically removed from their children's daily lives hinders the ability to engage in hands-on parenting, in ways such as providing care, nurturing, and guidance. The inability to be physically present for important milestones and events in their children's lives intensifies the strain, leading to feelings of guilt, sadness, and helplessness.

In this research, up to 94.2 percent of the incarcerated mothers before imprisonment had custody of their children (78.9 percent of every child and 15.3 percent of some). Almost half of these women (44.23 percent) had children under five years old, a highly dependent age group. Physical separation has been a painful experience for both mothers and their children, especially if the children have no other dependable adult at home, as in the case of Saengchan and her second son.

Saengchan had three sons, aged 16, 14, and 4 when she was imprisoned. The eldest son migrated for work in another province and was able to send some remuneration to partially support his father, younger brothers, and mother. The youngest one was put under the care of Saengchan's elder sister. Bao, the second son was under the care of his biological father, who was mentally ill and needed regular medication. After Saengchan was arrested, nobody took care of his medication, so his illness got worsened. Bao was left living alone with

his aggressive, mentally-ill father. Traumatic separation from his mother, loneliness, and fear destroyed his aspirations in life. He turned to using hemp, stealing, losing interest and motivation to study, and eventually dropping out of school. Saengchan watched the ruin of her son from prison and begged her relatives to help him. Bao was moved out to stay with his grandparents in another village, but still refused to go to school, or resigned and moved to another school in his grandparents' village.

My sister told me that Bao has completely dropped out of school. I cannot do anything to help him, because I am stuck in here. No one else is to be blamed, but ME. I made him... (putting her hand on her head) (Saengchan [pseudonym], 2015).

## **2. Limited communication and contact**

Communication between incarcerated mothers and their children is often restricted and heavily regulated by correctional institutions. Lack of access to phone calls and limited visitation hours can impede the maintenance of a strong bond between mother and child. Previous research reported that some mothers do not want their children or loved ones to see them in the prison setting, but many more identified the insurmountable logistical barriers which prevented visits (e.g., Allen, Flaherty, and Ely, 2010; Kennedy, Mennicke, and Allen, 2020). The infrequency and brevity of interactions make it challenging for incarcerated mothers to provide emotional support, offer guidance, and stay connected with their children's day-to-day experiences.

In this research, 13.5 percent of the inmates have had no visit at all by their children; 11.4 percent are visited once a year, and 7.7 percent twice a year. The prison under study is located in the provincial town while the inmates' families live in rural areas. Traveling by public transportation takes several hours and is expensive. Sometimes it is not possible to travel to pay a visit and return to the village within the same day. Visitations were allowed only on weekdays, making it hard for children to take a leave from school to visit their mothers. When asked whether the incarcerated mothers wished they had more visits from their

children, most (88.5 percent) said they did want to have more visits. The ones who declined explained that they did not want their children to see them in prison, as this might have a negative effect on their children's minds. Some were worried about their children's safety going to town, or that the caregivers had to spend a lot of money. If the family could manage to make a visit, they found that the visiting environment was not friendly, as the mothers and their loved ones are separated by a glass partition and have to talk via phone. Corresponding by letters is another important alternative way to connect, but letters are checked and, in many instances, lost.

When my children visited me, I cried. I do not want them to visit me. There are too many cars in this town. I'm worried they would have an accident or be in danger. Also, my mother is getting too old. I told her it was not necessary to visit me. Letters are good enough for me (Chittra [pseudonym], 2015).

It's not easy for my father to take my children on the bus to visit me. If they could come, I would be very happy. I want to talk to my children, I want to hug them, I want to do things like I used to do at home. But I can't do it, I can only talk, I can only see their face. When talking, there is a glass partition, and we have to talk via the phone. The sound is not clear (Wantana [pseudonym], 2015).

I felt so sad when I visited my daughter because I had no money for her. When I got the elder's pension, at 600 and later at 700 baht per month, I would go. But the transportation from our village to the district town, and then to the provincial town and back, was already 640 baht (Somsri's mother [pseudonym], 2018).

I wrote two or three letters to my home but no one replied. I don't know if they received my letters or not. So, I stopped writing. As for phone calls, they [prison officers] allow only contact via home phone, not mobile phones. But we don't have a home phone (Ped [pseudonym], 2015).

When my children visited me, they asked me to write to them. I said I had sent them six letters but got no reply. My children said they have never received any letters from me. I really don't know what happened (Somsri [pseudonym], 2015).

### 3. Stigmatization and societal judgment

The stigma associated with incarceration can further exacerbate the role strain experienced by incarcerated mothers. They may face judgment from society, family, and even their children, which can undermine their self-esteem and confidence as mothers. The fear of being seen as an inadequate or unfit mother compounds the challenges they face in maintaining a positive self-image and fulfilling their parental role effectively. Worse, their young children face judgment and sometimes bullying from peers and relatives, and the mother is not there to protect them.

My son is eight years old. At first, our family did not tell him I was in jail. My mother told him I left home to work. But when he went to school, his friends called him 'son of a prisoner.' So my mother had to tell him the truth. I'm so sad that I cannot protect my poor son (Lalana [pseudonym], 2015).

I was told that my relatives said to my son, 'Your mother is in jail. You are an abandoned child, no father, no mother.' How can my relatives talk so badly to my son? I feel so bad that I have created this inferiority complex for my son (Wantana [pseudonym], 2015).

When my daughter (*aged 14—Authors*) visited me, she complained her teacher called her a 'fatherless girl' and 'daughter of a prisoner.' But it's good that her friends never call her that. Because I am away, my daughter has to prepare breakfast for her younger brother and accompany him to his school. When she arrived late at school, the teacher spoke badly to her. I am so worried because she wrote me a letter saying she wanted to find a new school (Chittra [pseudonym], 2015).

### 4. Parental decision-making challenges

Incarceration restricts the ability of mothers to make decisions regarding their children's well-being. Important choices regarding education, healthcare, and discipline are often transferred to other caregivers. This loss of autonomy and control over parenting decisions can contribute to a sense of powerlessness and disconnection from the mothering role.

In this research, before incarceration, up to 94.23 percent of the women had their children living with them, under their care (Table 6 above), implying that most mothers used to play important roles in decision-making regarding their children. Meanwhile, up to 25 percent of the incarcerated mothers are not satisfied with the care provided by the caregivers and felt powerless to change or improve the situation for their children.

I am fortunate that my mother is taking care of my children. She loves them. But the problem is my mother did not even finish primary school, so it is difficult for her to understand the schooling situation, the needs, and the problems of school children nowadays. Sometimes she is too strict, for example, with children's sports time after school hours and school activities on the weekends. Sometimes she forbids my children to join these activities. This could be frustrating for children, and they could be excluded from their peers. When my children visited me, I told them to be patient and tell my mother to be less strict. What else can I do? (Chittra [pseudonym], 2015).

### 5. Emotional and mental health challenges

The stress, trauma, and isolation associated with incarceration can significantly impact an incarcerated mother's emotional and mental well-being. Coping with the challenges of imprisonment while trying to fulfill the responsibilities of motherhood as described above can lead to emotional distress, depression, anxiety, and a sense of inadequacy. These psychological factors further intensify the strain on incarcerated mothers, making it difficult for them to effectively nurture their



children's emotional needs. Some mothers hid the fact that they were imprisoned from their children and had to endure the pain of its consequences.

Before leaving my children for the prison, I told the truth to all my children, except the youngest one who was too young to understand. I told him that I would go to work for money. When he visited me here, he said: 'Why do you stay here so long? I miss you. I want to hug you, Mom.' It's painful to hide the truth, and I feel so sorry for my child (Saengchan [pseudonym], 2015). My youngest son (*aged 14–Authors*) still doesn't know that I'm in jail... Nowadays I don't dare to write any letter home. The prison changed its rule two or three months ago. At the end of the letter, it informs the years of imprisonment, for example, F.I. [female inmate] Yupa, sentenced to 25 years in prison. Knowing this, I stopped writing home. In the past, such a statement was not placed on our letters. I am afraid to write to my family... If my youngest son happens to read it, it won't be good for his mind... In the past, when I was worried about my eldest child's studies, I would write him a letter, but now I don't dare to write any letters (Yupa [pseudonym], 2015).

In conclusion, the combination of the factors as discussed earlier creates a challenging environment for incarcerated mothers, leading to role strain as they grapple with the demands and expectations of motherhood within the constraints of the prison system. Recognizing and understanding these challenges is crucial to developing supportive interventions and policies that address the unique needs of incarcerated mothers and promote healthy mother-child relationships during and after incarceration. A clearer understanding of the way incarcerated mothers cope with their role-strain problems is also important. In the next part, we will focus on how some mothers behind bars redefine their maternal roles.

### **Redefining Maternal Roles**

Despite the challenges mentioned above, a considerable number of incarcerated mothers have demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability by reimagining their maternal roles within the prison environment. Through innovative approaches to motherhood, these women actively work to promote the well-being of their children and cultivate a sense of connection, even within the confines of the correctional system. Redefining maternal roles is a valuable approach for incarcerated mothers to navigate the challenges of role strain and establish a meaningful connection with their children despite the constraints of the prison environment. By adapting their understanding of maternal roles, incarcerated mothers can find alternative ways to nurture their children's well-being and maintain a sense of maternal identity. Some of the positive actions of the incarcerated mothers include their emphasis of emotional support to their children, involvement in children's growth and development, communication and collaboration with the caregivers, and fostering of personal growth and care in the prison.

#### **1. Emphasizing emotional support**

In the absence of physical presence, some incarcerated mothers focused on providing emotional support to their children. This involved engaging in open and honest communication during visitations or through letters, expressing love and encouragement, and actively listening to their children's feelings and concerns. In line with other studies on family in distress (Churat and Sakunpong, 2022; Muensit, Thongyou, and Lapanun, 2019a), by prioritizing emotional connection, incarcerated mothers can play an important role in their children's lives, fostering resilience and offering a sense of security.

My daughter wrote me often, and I wrote back. She is good at school, even though sometimes she's late because she has to take her younger brother to another school first. Some teachers spoke unkindly to her. She was very upset and wrote to me that she wanted to change schools. I told her to calm down. I told her she's got good friends at school, which is very important (Chittra [pseudonym], 2015).

## 2. Being involved in their children's growth and development

Despite physical separation and other complications, some parents are determined to contribute to their children's growth and development (Stringer and Barnes, 2012; Muensit, Thongyou, and Lapanun, 2019b; Tarat, 2020). Many mothers in this study emphasized the importance of education, encouraged their children to pursue academic goals, and provided stimulation through letters and conversations during short visits of their children and their caregivers. One mother in this study was visited by her daughter (aged 14) and some of her sports team members, indicating that the daughter has trust and pride in both her mother and friends.

My daughter used to visit me with her volleyball team members. She is good at sports and is on the school team. I am glad that she came here with her friends. She's got true friends and is not ashamed of me being in prison. Girls who play sports are a great group (Chittra [pseudonym], 2015).

My daughter is afraid that she will not be able to continue with her studies after finishing middle school, even though she got good grades, 3.6 and 3.7 (*out of 4—Authors*). I shared my experience with her that when I was young, my mother (*the present caregiver—Authors*) was very poor and did not value high education, but still I could finish high school. I told her she will do it better than I have done (Chittra [pseudonym], 2015).

## 3. Establishing communication and collaboration with caregivers

Establishing communication and collaboration with caregivers outside the prison, such as relatives or foster parents, is essential for incarcerated mothers. By maintaining regular contact, discussing important decisions, and sharing information about their children's well-being, incarcerated mothers can remain engaged in parenting. Collaborative relationships with caregivers can help bridge the gap between incarcerated mothers and their children, ensuring a sense of continuity in parenting roles.

When my mother visited me here, she complained that she was tired and said—you [Chittra] have to write a letter to tell them [Chittra's children], teach them not to come home late, etc. Similarly, my children wrote to me that they feel sorry for Grandma. So, I sent a reply to my children, telling them to take good care of Grandma, that she is very old, and they must not let anything happen to her until the day I get out of here. Just wait for me (Chittra [pseudonym], 2015).

Many mothers in this study (Chittra, Wantana, Lalada, Saengchan, and Somsri) worry that the caregivers cannot give good advice or effectively respond to the problems and needs of their children, particularly when it comes to sensitive issues such as their children being bullied by peers, older children and even teachers, children dropping out from school, school changes, hemp and drug use among children or their friends, or children deliberately changing the caregiver by themselves. They felt that they needed some advice from knowledgeable people or experts to deal with these issues. Evidently, there is an urgent need to expand the prison's program to support the parenting roles of incarcerated mothers.

## 4. Fostering personal growth and self-care

Encouraging personal growth and self-care is vital for incarcerated mothers. By focusing on their own well-being, such as pursuing education, vocational training, or mental health support, they can enhance their parenting skills and self-esteem. Taking care of themselves emotionally, physically, and mentally allows incarcerated mothers to better support their children and redefine their roles as resilient, capable, and nurturing mothers. In turn, many mothers reported that their role as a mother is the most important source of energy that makes them want to be a better person.

There are many activities organized by the prison for us, like yoga, and cloth painting. We can choose what we like. I like cloth painting. I thought it would make a nice gift for my three children. So I used my savings to buy three T-shirts and paint something that I know my kids will like on them. When my

children wear the T-shirts, it will remind them how much I love them (Chittra [pseudonym], 2015).

My father wrote letters to teach me. He said that when you came out of prison, behave yourself, and conduct yourself well so that you will be a good mother for your children. Children grow up every day. There are many things my father teaches me (Wantana [pseudonym], 2015).

In summary, some of the incarcerated mothers that we interviewed overcome challenges by redefining their maternal roles within the prison environment. Despite the physical separation from their children, these mothers display remarkable resilience and adaptability by finding innovative ways to promote their children's well-being and maintain a meaningful connection. Four key approaches to redefining maternal roles are highlighted. 1) Emphasizing emotional support: Incarcerated mothers focus on providing emotional support to their children through open and honest communication during visitations or through letters. This helps foster resilience and a sense of security in the children. 2) Involvement in children's growth and development: Despite being in prison, mothers encourage their children to pursue academic goals and engage in stimulating conversations through letters and short visits. This involvement in child development creates a sense of trust and pride in both the mother and her children. 3) Communicating and collaborating with caregivers: Maintaining communication and collaboration with caregivers outside the prison, such as relatives or foster parents, is crucial. This helps incarcerated mothers remain engaged in parenting and ensures a sense of continuity in their roles. 4) Fostering personal growth and self-care: Encouraging personal growth and self-care is vital for incarcerated mothers. Pursuing education, vocational training, or mental health support enhances their parenting skills and self-esteem, making them resilient and nurturing mothers.

Overall, redefining maternal roles allows incarcerated mothers to find alternative ways to nurture their children's well-being and maintain a sense of maternal identity despite the challenges of the

prison environment. These positive actions of incarcerated mothers, including emotional support, involvement in their children's growth and development, communication and collaboration with caregivers, and self-care, contribute to building a meaningful connection with their children during their time in prison.

### **Implication for Research, Practice, and Policy**

The implications of this research call for collaborative efforts from various stakeholders to address the interrelated challenges faced by incarcerated mothers and their children. First and foremost, correctional institutions should revise visiting regulations to foster stronger mother-child relationships. Practices like the contact visit project (*yiam klaichid*-in Thai), which allows the inmates to enjoy a visit from their family members without partitions or barriers outside the detention building once a year, should be expanded. The establishment of online visiting systems can further facilitate communication and bonding between incarcerated mothers and their loved ones. Monitoring the impact and challenges of these initiatives will provide valuable insights for future improvements.

Additionally, courts should consider mitigating factors, such as lack of criminal history and non-severity of the offense when sentencing women offenders, taking into account their caretaking responsibilities and backgrounds. By recognizing the negative effects of maternal incarceration on children, schools, communities, and local governments should develop comprehensive policies and procedures to support these children. Incorporating the needs of incarcerated mothers and their children into social welfare and development plans is crucial, particularly in rural communities.

Furthermore, addressing social stigmatization, bullying, school dropout, and anti-social activities faced by the children of incarcerated mothers requires concerted action. Training programs for incarcerated mothers in effective mothering from prison should be implemented. Reforms in the justice system, correctional institutions, and social welfare systems are necessary to ensure the rights and well-being of both mothers and children.

## Conclusion

This study sheds light on the role strain experienced by incarcerated mothers and their resilience in redefining maternal roles within the prison context. The findings emphasize the challenges arising from mother-child separation, limited communication, societal stigmatization, restricted decision-making, and the emotional and mental health burdens associated with incarceration. However, incarcerated mothers have exhibited adaptability by prioritizing emotional support, involvement with their children's growth and development, communication and collaboration with caregivers, and personal growth. The study reveals important issues of how incarcerated mothers construct meaning of their parenting role based on experiences of mothering during custody, suggesting that prison can play an important role in improving mother-child connection. The voices of incarcerated mothers and their children also reveal how the redefinition of mothering significantly affects the well-being of both mothers and their children. The study contributes to the existing knowledge that mothering from prison is significantly different from parenting at home, and that it is important for the society to understand alternative roles of mothering in different environments, including mothering from prison. This awareness, if fully realized, could pave the way to better social acceptance and create a supportive safety zone for a better life of incarcerated mothers and their children. The study outlined the recommendations highlighting the importance of policy changes, collaborative efforts, and comprehensive support systems to alleviate the challenges faced by incarcerated mothers and their children. By implementing these measures, we can work towards creating a more compassionate society that respects the rights and needs of incarcerated mothers and their children.

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