

Research

Caring for those within: caring from the outside

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Abstract

Millions of families have a member who is incarcerated. Incarceration affects not only the individual who is imprisoned but also their significant others, as those 'outside' often end up bearing the brunt of the criminal acts committed by those 'within'. This article examines the experiences, difficulties, and challenges encountered by female partners of male inmates in Malta as seen through the eyes of professionals who support families of the incarcerated. Through qualitative in-depth interviewing with professionals from within the public and voluntary sectors with extensive years of experience in the criminal justice field, the study examines the distinct consequences of incarceration on female partners of male inmates as they strive to care for those 'within' from the 'outside'. The challenges faced by partners/carers are multifactorial as they lead to socio-economic and financial strain, psychological and emotional burden, stigma, isolation, and communication barriers which in turn impact the dynamics of the romantic/caring relationship. They also struggle to navigate through the institutional barriers and process of correctional systems whilst also bearing the burden of care and brunt of relational maintenance. Based on the findings emerging from the study, the paper proposes recommendations for future research and improved policy development in the field within the Maltese context.

Keywords Inmates · Caring · Stigma · Partners

1 Caring for those within: caring from the outside

Worldwide, more than 11.5 million people are imprisoned [1], with around 690 prisoners being held in Malta's prisons as of January 2024 [2]. The incarceration rate in Malta stood at 132 (per 100,000 inhabitants) [3], with its inmate population experiencing a significant 9.4% increase between 2010 and 2020 [4]. This rise in incarceration which continues to channel many people into prison, has disproportionately increased the influx of men into prisons. The male incarceration rate is about 13 times higher than that of females, especially among marginalised groups and people of colour [5]. Comparative and longitudinal research confirms this gender gap which shapes "the incidence, prevalence, type and seriousness of crimes" [6]. Men are more likely to be charged and convicted for more serious and violent offences such as homicide and attempted murder [7] and organised crime [8], which carry a higher penalty [9]. This gender disparity is also manifest within the Maltese context, as a full 90.9% of inmates are male [2]. In Malta, drug-related offences account for around 24.5% of those incarcerated, homicide or attempted homicide for 16.2%, 3.7% for assault and battery, 11.2% for rape and other sexual offences, 9.6% for robbery and theft charges, 7.5% for financial and economic crime and 0.4% for cases of terrorism. Other offences totalled to 28.2% of the remaining prison population [10]. The average length of imprisonment stood at 10.7 months [10].

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As incarceration is a 'family affair' whose ramifications transcend beyond the prisoner, it leaves a profound impact on the inmates' significant others [11] as they end up secondary victims of criminal acts. While imprisonment poses various detrimental effects on the prisoner, it also has a punitive impact on the prisoner's family [12]. The huge rise in rates of incarceration has sparked widespread concern about how this trend is affecting partners and children of those imprisoned [12]. Yet, whilst the pursuit of justice for incarcerated individuals and their direct victims is accounted, the needs and welfare of their better halves and significant others of the incarcerated is often overlooked.

Imprisonment can contribute to a wide range of challenges and difficulties for significant others of the incarcerated, particularly when the inmate is a parent or breadwinner of a household with dependent others. These challenges are multifactorial, contributing to stigma, economic burden, strained relationships, weak community ties, and reduced life prospects [5, 13, 14]. For this reason, male incarceration negatively affects their spouses' well-being in a multitude of ways. A man's imprisonment leaves his partner and children financially, emotionally, and socially vulnerable. Notwithstanding this fact, a considerable number of women opt to sustain the connection and continue to support the incarcerated individual [15] caring from the 'outside' to those 'within'.

This article examines the experiences, difficulties, and challenges encountered by female partners of male inmates in Malta as seen through the eyes of professionals who support families of the incarcerated. Through qualitative in-depth interviewing with professionals from within the public and voluntary sectors with extensive years of experience in the criminal justice field, the study examines the distinct consequences of incarceration on female partners of male inmates as they strive to care for those 'within' from the 'outside'.

The following will present an overview of the theoretical and empirical analysis of the impact of incarceration on the partners/carers of those incarcerated, focussing on the emotional, financial, and social implications on well-being. Emotional burdens entail stress, shame, guilt, psychological anguish, and solitude, as well as damaged communication and connections with the jailed partner. Financial burdens include loss of income owing to partner's incarceration, increased financial responsibility and strain leading to insufficient funds for living expenses. Social wellbeing is affected by stigma and prejudice towards partners/carers of jailed individuals, limited social support, isolation from friends and family, and difficulties maintaining and creating new social relationships. Such challenges often intersect and interrelate, posing a 'ripple effect' on all domains of wellbeing [16] whilst compounding the difficulties faced by partners/carers of those within prison walls, "both when they are within the facility's walls visiting their mates and when they are at home striving to remain connected to absent men" [17].

2 Caring: a feminised burden

Misra [18] defines care labour as both unpaid and compensated care for others. Caring for others, whether they are family members, friends, or patients, involves innumerable obstacles that can be emotionally, psychologically and physically taxing. These difficulties become considerably more acute when the care receiver is detained.

Theorists have observed that care work is a gendered issue [19]. According to Meyer [19], despite its significant mental, physical, and psychological labour, care work is often undervalued despite its important contribution to society. This undervaluation reflects wider patriarchal ideologies, structures, and processes, as caring roles are often disproportionately born by women and girls. As imprisonment is a masculinised terrain due to the disproportionate number of males as compared to female inmates, whilst caring, particularly in its uncompensated form remains predominantly a feminised responsibility, caring from the outside to those within, constitutes a power gendered issue.

Female partners/carers bear a disproportionate responsibility of care for inmates, accounting for the majority of private visitants in custodial settings [20]. Prisons' distinctive environment characterised by rigorous laws, restricted access, and intrusive security measures complicates the romantic/care relationship and adds added complexity to the caring 'burden'. Those caring from the outside to those within are often transformed into 'quasi-inmates' [20] as the boundaries between the prison and their home become blurred and eroded. As intimate and romantic relationships become adapted to the harsh and intrusive realities of prison life, life outside the confines of the prison is reshaped through various financial, emotional and social hardships with negative implications for wellbeing.

Female partners/carers of the incarcerated bear the brunt of relational maintenance [21], involving efforts (both communicative and cognitive) adopted (both routinely and strategically) to maintain relationships. Another underestimated aspect of the female carer/partner role concerns the function as gatekeepers to relationships between inmates and their children [22]. Incarceration often entails the disruption of the coparenting relationship, and the processes by which parents negotiate the roles, rules, responsibilities and contributions to their offsprings [23]. As a

result, incarceration also demands a restructuring and renegotiation of these parental roles and obligations, with the burden and “complexities of incarcerated coparenting” [24] often falling upon the mother [22]. Female partners/carers often also bear many responsibilities relating to legal advocacy and inmate’s rehabilitation and release planning [25]. This burden of care contributes to female partners/carers’ ‘secondary prisonization’ as they struggle to address the unmet needs arising from the care deficits of the correctional system [25].

Yet, despite these challenges, caring for those within from the outside may also provide the right opportunity for partners/carers to reshape the terms of the relationship to a more loving and respectful one [20]. In this context, imprisonment can “act as an instrument for improving relationships” [26] by enabling communication between partners in a secure controlled environment [27], facilitating a healthy coparenting alliance which can improve family cohesion [28] and bequeathing social welfare support [20]. Thus, many female partners/carers uphold an ambivalent stance towards the custodial institutional setting [20].

3 Caring from the outside: implications on wellbeing

Due to its complexity, the nature of the romantic/care relationship by those outside to those within a custodial setting necessitates a comprehensive approach that takes into account not just financial and logistical difficulties [29] that may encumber the relationship but also the social, psychological and emotional repercussions for partners/carers as they have to navigate through stigma [30], social isolation and withdrawal [31], stress and anxiety [32], and despair and humiliation [30]. As will be further explored in the sections below, these varied implications on the wellbeing of partners/carers extend beyond the individuals concerned through their impact on the dynamics of the romantic/caring relationship itself, a relationship which is “unique and potentially more tenuous” [26].

3.1 Financial burden

A spouse generally provides essential financial support for families, and since men remain in many contexts the primary household providers, incarceration deprives women of this crucial assistance [33]. Households affected by male partners’ incarceration are prone to greater economic hardships [34], a situation which becomes more acute for those from low-socioeconomic backgrounds.

Female partners/carers face significant economic challenges due to the incarceration of their male spouses as they navigate through the experience of ‘lone parenthood’. Due to the loss of jobs and associated earnings, men’s detention results in reduced family earnings. Imprisonment forces partners/carers to provide alone for all necessities in terms of food, clothing, health and education costs, and other needs for themselves and their families [29]. Limited or inadequate finances often lead partners/carers to have to cut expenditure on essential necessities, resulting in access to poor goods and services which further perpetuates gender-based disparities in many areas [34]. For example, the reduction of spending on healthcare due to inability to finance medical insurance and costs contributes to adverse health outcomes, including gender-based health issues, especially for partners/carers from low-socioeconomic backgrounds [5]. Partners/carers of incarcerated individuals often face housing instability due to financial strain and the possibility of eviction [35]. Accessing affordable and adequate secure housing presents considerable challenges, while substandard housing conditions can exert detrimental impacts on both physical and emotional well-being.

Apart from resulting in ‘extensive and intensive’ lowered earnings, male incarceration is also associated with increased unemployment for their female partners [36]. Female partner/carers of the incarcerated may need to work additional hours or multiple jobs and seek public safety nets to adequately support themselves and their families [29]. The imprisonment of a partner leads to increased dependence on government support and higher uptake of social welfare benefits [37]. Furthermore, incarceration leads to added financial cost and burden as partners/carers often end up supporting their partners while in prison, thus bearing the cost of incarceration [29]. The costs associated with relationship maintenance such as phone calls, and travelling fares for in-person visitation may result in exorbitant fees, particularly where communication costs are high and prisons are remotely located, adding to monetary strain and financial burden [20, 26, 38]. Those on the outside often fully bear the burden of commissary allowances for inmates, impacting their economic well-being [39]. Additionally, women are often responsible for attorney fees, court fines, and legal costs and other associated expenses which diminish their available finances and expose them to added poverty and material deprivation [29].

Diminished income and added expenses expose partners/carers to significant economic challenges, in some cases even having to recur to drastic measures such as taking on large debts and selling family assets, including houses or investments. Thus, male incarceration reduces partners/carers' access to earnings and exposes them to additional expenses which might otherwise be utilised for other family and household needs [20].

3.2 The emotional and physical toll

The imposition of a custodial sanction has a significant influence on the emotional and psychological wellbeing of partners/carers of detained individuals. Light [40] elucidated three distinct phases through which incarcerated individuals' significant others navigate during the duration of their loved one's imprisonment. These stages encompass the processes of 'acceptance and adjustment', 'maintaining communication', and 'adapting to the sentence'.

Partners/carers of incarcerated individuals often experience a range of emotions, including but not limited to loneliness, anxiety, worry, grief, loss, and powerlessness. To avoid negative social consequences such as labelling and ostracization, spouses often make attempts to conceal their partner's imprisonment [41]. Light and Campbell [42] expound upon the notion of 'guilt by association', a phenomenon that engenders a diminished sense of worthiness among families of incarcerated individuals due to the activities of their imprisoned relatives. This can result in a decreased likelihood of significant others accessing necessary support.

Given that criminal justice proceedings can extend over a significant period of time, potentially spanning multiple months or even years, this prolonged timeframe can impose considerable strain on loved ones, who may find themselves uncertain and apprehensive about what lies ahead [43]. The incarceration of a spouse can significantly impact the female partner/carer's mental wellbeing, increasing the risk of stress, anxiety, depression and decreasing life satisfaction [34]. Indeed, female partners of the incarcerated often experience clinical depression [44], as well as sadness, chronic grief and suicidality [45]. This is due to the lack of emotional support, financial difficulties, and emotional separation from loved ones, which can contribute to chronic stress and consequently mental health difficulties. Emotional burdens extend beyond psychological health as they spill over to other domains of wellbeing, including physical health. Women with incarcerated partners have a shorter life expectancy by an average of 2.6 years compared to those whose partner has not been incarcerated [46]. Female partners of the incarcerated tend to exhibit poor health lifestyles, characterized by smoking and alcohol and substance abuse [47]. They are also more predisposed to suffer from asthma and hypertension [47], reduced appetite, insomnia and bodily pains [45]. Yi et al. [48] found a significant link between a partner's incarceration during pregnancy and a 30% increased risk of preterm birth and a 200% higher risk of unfavourable birth outcomes in infants born to incarcerated fathers. Partners/carers of the incarcerated thus face a range of emotional and physical challenges that can significantly impact their general well-being and quality of life.

3.3 Stigma and social repercussions

The presence of having a family member entwined in criminal justice proceedings can potentially undermine social support networks within a community resulting in feelings of isolation and reduced access to community resources. Women, as partners/carers of incarcerated individuals often experience harsh stigmatisation from the community. Stigmatisation in this context refers to the pains and deprivations women feel as partners/carers of the incarcerated [49] due to the negative stereotypes and prejudices of society against incarcerated individuals, their relatives, and significant others. Partners/carers of incarcerated individuals are "blamed and shamed" [50] as they suffer from courtesy stigma as a result of their association with their significant other [16]. They are often portrayed as fractious and untrustworthy [49] and as somehow to blame and thus responsible for the offender's criminal behaviour [50]. The "gendered expectation of care extends to a gendered notion of blame" as females are considered responsible for the partner's criminal engagement [51]. These prejudices affect power relations and induce fear and shame among partners/carers of incarcerated individuals leading to social isolation and exclusion but also to more overt negative reactions such as harassment and bullying. Community socialization agents, such as the media, continue to reinforce these prejudices [52]. Katova [49] highlights the severe impact of stigmatisation on women who may develop self-harming behaviours and suicidal ideations. Isolation from community activities and withdrawal from support groups can exacerbate psycho-social challenges, negatively impacting partner/carers and their children.

3.4 Compromised relationships

Incarceration promotes strained relationships between couples that expose them to stress, anxiety, and mental health issues [53]. The burden is more significant for women, who must ensure emotional support for their children when they have no fatherly figure or attention to attend to their ailing emotional needs. Female partners/carers often must break the news that their spouse has been incarcerated to other family members, including children [54]. Insufficient access to information may result in the child experiencing uncertainty and confusion, leading to a diminished sense of trust and the impairment of the child-caregiver relationship [55].

While visiting a loved one in prison can help families stay connected, it can sometimes be difficult due to institutional and policy restrictions [38]. Indeed, various elements inherent within prison culture and structures tend to hinder and impede the sustainment of romantic and matrimonial relationships [56]. Prisoners and their outside partner/carer may experience feelings of isolation and sexual deprivation [57]. Lack of intimacy and open communication act as barriers to relational maintenance with partners who are imprisoned [58]. Many marriages and relationships dissolve due to incarceration, leading to significant economic, social, and emotional burdens for partners/carers and their children [34]. Loneliness and the multitude of stressors associated with having an incarcerated partner may contribute to extramarital affairs [59], which in turn may lead to the dissolution of the relationship between the inmate and their partner/carer and increased risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases [34]. As a result of the dissolution of relationships, but also of lone parenthood, the rising number of male partners in prison has led to a rise in single female-headed households [34], which has major ramifications for family relations and socioeconomic issues.

4 Methodology

This research aims to increase awareness of the consequences of incarceration on the partners of the incarcerated within the Maltese context. By enhancing understanding of the experiences and challenges encountered by those caring for those within from the outside, focussing specifically on women whose partners are incarcerated, the research aims to lead to improved policy development and service provision.

Though much has been written on the difficulties faced by incarcerated parents, the effects of parental imprisonment on children, and the barriers to resuming relationships with children after release [60, 61] the experiences of female significant others have received less attention [20, 62, 63] despite their significant role in the lives of inmates. This lacuna is particularly evident within the Maltese context, with a specific dearth of research from a psychological standpoint [64] and on the needs of families of inmates and significant others [65]. Following the above overview of the impact of incarceration on the partners of those incarcerated and how this leads to caring burdens, this section will provide an overview of the methodological design of the study followed by an examination of the challenges faced by partners of the incarcerated within the local context as recounted by the participants of the study.

Guided by the following main research question; 'What are the challenges encountered by female carers/partners of the incarcerated within the Maltese context?', this research employs qualitative in-depth interviewing with five professionals from within the public and voluntary sectors engaged within the criminal justice field in Malta. These professionals which were recruited through their respective entities which acted as gatekeepers, included a forensic psychologist from the Correctional Services Agency, probation and parole officers from the Department of Probation and Parole, and executives from the 'Rise' Foundation and the 'Mid-Dlam ghad-Dawl' organisation. These entities constitute the main public service providers in the field of corrections; the Correctional Services Agency governing the management of prison facilities in Malta and the Department of Probation and Parole being responsible for the supervision of community-based sanctions. 'Rise' Foundation and 'Mid-Dlam ghad-Dawl' comprise two main non-governmental organisations involved in the provision of residential and community-based rehabilitation services and the delivery of psycho-social support to their families. Participants who upheld diverse demographic age and gender characteristics held extensive years of experience in the field, ranging from a minimum of 5 to a maximum of 25 years. The interview focused on a range of relevant issues regarding the impact of incarceration on the lives of female partners/carers of male inmates. The interviews were structured to elicit detailed information regarding the financial, social and emotional impact of imprisonment on female carers/partners and the impact of communication

and other institutional barriers on the relationship between those incarcerated and their partner. The interview questions also focused on the services that participants and their respective entities provide to partners of the incarcerated in Malta, what challenges they encounter in the provision of such services and their views and appraisal of existing laws, policies and programs.

The research has focused on collating the views and personal experiences of professionals working with family members and significant others of the incarcerated rather than interviewing directly partners/carers of the incarcerated primarily due to ethical concerns regarding the sensitive nature of the research topic. The research design is underlined by the principle of minimising harm [66] and thus aimed to prevent circumstances which could be distressful to participants and which risk eliciting re-victimisation and secondary traumatisation [67]. Another main ethical issue relates to the challenge of truly obtaining informed consent from partners/carers [68] and assent from inmates for their significant others to speak on issues which also concern them. Moreover, interviewing professions employed in the field was considered as more feasible, pragmatic, and cost-effective since it enables the coverage of a multitude of diverse and rich experiences from experts in the field, who support and advocate on behalf of families of the incarcerated.

The University of Malta's Faculty for Social Wellbeing Research Ethics Board granted ethical approval for the study, ensuring it adhered to prevailing ethical principles of safeguarding voluntary participation and informed consent, resulting in no harm to participants, and ensuring confidentiality. The interviews, taking approximately one hour each were conducted between August 2023 and February 2024 and were audio recorded and transcribed. Based on Caulfield's [69] six-step thematic analysis model involving the processes of becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and defining themes and write-up, various relevant themes were elicited on caring for those within from the outside. An integrated discussion approach was adopted to present the findings arising from the interviews while simultaneously reflecting on their implications for existing literature [70]. Such themes relating to the challenges that partners of incarcerated individuals experience financially, emotionally, and socially and the significance of adequate support structures will be laid down in the following section, followed by recommendations for future research and improved policy development.

5 Findings

The findings arising from the study, strongly align with the themes identified in the literature on the implications of male incarceration on the wellbeing of female partners/carers. Such repercussions, as presented in the sub-themes below concern various challenges arising from the financial burden, the emotional and physical toll and the social stigma, which in turn impact on the romantic/care relationship, leading to compromised relationships. These interconnected repercussions greatly affect partners/carers' quality of life as they navigate through the experience of their mate's incarceration within the framework of a romantic/care relationship from the outside to those within. The last thematic area focusses on the support and coping mechanisms that the participants consider necessary for addressing the challenges faced by partner/carers of inmates and improving their romantic relationships with the incarcerated half.

5.1 The financial burden

Partners/carers of the incarcerated in Malta may experience significant financial burden and economic hardship. The participants of the study unanimously agreed that the loss of one partner's poses a major problem for financial stability. This financial difficulty may be more pronounced for those partners/carers who are unemployed and have no stable income. Despite having a favorable labour force participation rate of 72.0%, females in Malta still account for around two-thirds (58.7%) of those inactive [71], with inactivity being strongly associated with caring responsibilities.

Participants A, B, and C pointed out that partners/carers of the incarcerated incur additional costs associated with the payment of legal bills or providing basic needs for their partner while they are incarcerated. This can make it more difficult to manage debt, keep up with housing loans or rent, and fulfil basic living requirements, contributing to added stress on top of an already tough position. Participant D stated that the consequences are more severe for those whose partners are serving longer prison sentences. Participant C argued that Malta's prisons often lack employment opportunities for many inmates, in which they can learn new skills and keep themselves busy while earning some form of income: *"In Malta, only those who are lucky can obtain a job in prison; they must be obedient and competent to secure employment. However, they can assist their partners on the outside if they are working."*

Participant A vouched that, when a partner/carer has to work multiple jobs to support their family and the person in prison, the relationship may suffer due to a lack of time and energy. Participant B argues that the financial toll of a couple's earnings is not only due to the halving of earnings but also the added cost for the partner who is not currently imprisoned, as they need to finance their imprisonment. Insufficient financial assistance from the imprisoned partner might worsen current economic difficulties and drive families deeper into poverty. Every participant agreed on this matter, which is consistent with the findings of Coile and Duggan [33] and Wildeman et al. [34] that male imprisonment results in a significant decline in household income, especially when the male is the primary earner. Therefore, female partners/carers are pushed to take on different duties and utilise community safety nets to provide for their families [29]. Moreover, when a partner is imprisoned, women are more likely to rely on state aid as they showed an increased probability of collecting social welfare benefits after their partner's incarceration [37].

5.2 The emotional and physical toll

When a partner goes to prison, there is a sudden and significant upheaval in the family dynamic, mainly due to the emotional toll arising from separation and loss. All participants emphasised that when loved ones are behind bars, partners/carers of the incarcerated frequently struggle with feelings of loss, abandonment, and loneliness. In addition, they can be anxious and overwhelmed about their incarcerated partner's well-being. Participant B noted that it is common especially in the initial stages of incarceration to receive calls from the partners/carers of the incarcerated asking for assurances about the inmate's safety and well-being.

A main issue which was mentioned by all participants concerns the emotional turmoil and suffering endured by partners/carers of the incarcerated in finding themselves and having to do things alone, especially when they share children with the incarcerated. Participant A states that the partner/carer's emotional loss due to deprived contact and the dual responsibility of caring for the family and the person in prison is significant. As explained by participant C: *"Raising children alone, going through problems alone and meeting life's demands, whether it is a family event, whether it is a feast. Everything is done alone, everything that takes a huge toll."* A partner/carer of an incarcerated person, left to shoulder obligations alone, can experience severe and complex emotional pain substantiating the evidence that incarceration-related separation is a traumatic experience that causes emotional disengagement and relational instability [72]. Feelings of helplessness, despair, and worry might arise from not knowing how the incarcerated individual is faring in prison. In this regard, participant B states that the emotional turmoil a partner/carer may experience when they have never been to prison themselves and are unaware of the prison system can be overwhelming since they may imagine the worst and be anxious about their partner's physical safety and psychological wellbeing. Thus, the emotional anguish endured by the partner of an incarcerated person who is left to bear alone the responsibilities of caring simultaneously for dependents on the outside and the partner within the prison, can be profound and intricate, also leading to physical and medical repercussions.

5.3 Stigma and social repercussions

The partners/carers of the incarcerated experience various negative societal implications. Due to their partner's incarceration, they can face criticism or estrangement from friends, family, and neighbours leading to fewer networks of support. Malta's compact geographical area and closely-knit community [73] where 'everyone knows everyone' may result in a distinct social dynamic in which stigma is more pervasive than in larger nations [74]. As was observed by participant C, partners/carers of jailed individuals often face judgmental comments from neighbours, family relatives and friends. *"Your husband stole, so you must have known about it! Or you should leave him. People tend to judge; therefore, that is why these partners retreat into themselves."* The inmate's partners/carers are often perceived by community members as being responsible or as contributing or condoning the criminal act committed by their loved ones, resulting in societal disapproval.

Female partner/carers shoulder a disproportionate burden as they are responsible for providing emotional support to their children, in addition to their obligation to keep informed about developments on the inmate's legal situation and rehabilitation progress to family members, including their offspring [54]. Participant A stated that it can be significantly difficult and stressful for partners/carers to explain to the children about their father's imprisonment. Occasionally, the incarcerated individual and their spouse choose not to inform the children of the incarceration, which in turn creates additional challenges. Divergent viewpoints and decisions between the couple may be more difficult to negotiate in the circumstances of a romantic/care relationship set apart through incarceration. As acknowledged by Participant A, such

divergences “will cause a lot of interpersonal issues, and especially when it comes to children, the relationship can be quickly lost.” Moreover, partners/carers may experience feelings of loneliness and sexual deprivation due to communication obstacles [57] which may contribute to strained and compromised relationships between the couple.

5.4 Compromised relationships

Practical obstacles like distance, visiting regulations, and communication hurdles might make it difficult to stay in touch with the incarcerated companion. Due to Malta’s modest size in comparison to other nations, distance is not a significant factor for prison visits, however, partners of the incarcerated still encounter various communication barriers, which may severely impact relationships.

Visiting jailed persons can present several challenges, as acknowledged by all participants. When women visit their partners, partners/carers are frequently subjected to inspections, confiscation of personal goods, and the imposition of tight regulations [75–77]. Consequently, Comfort [20] emphasises that partners of incarcerated individuals at times avoid visiting their loved ones due to lack of a sense of security during prison inspections, which can negatively affect their relationships. Participants mentioned that a main issue of concern relates to the body search procedure. Participants A and B specifically mentioned how embarrassed companions feel when being inspected. Participant A explained that it is a demeaning experience for the partner/carer of the detained individual and contended that: “As individuals undergo physical and psychological checks, leaving items in lockers, this degrading process can lead to emotional distance and loneliness for the prisoner and his partner.” Similarly, participant B conceded that: “While body searches are crucial for maintaining order and safety in prisons, they may be intrusive and unpleasant for visitors.” Participant A stated that social visits limit emotional and physical intimacy due to correctional officers’ presence and the general ambience of the prison environment. Participant C added that: “Partners may spend years without touching as jail visiting hours prohibit hugging, especially since conjugal visits have been eliminated. They convene at a table with a metal rod dividing them, under the watchful eye of the guards for security reasons.”

Prisons restrict prisoners’ access to communication technologies, preventing them from staying connected, which may result in strain and dissolution of the relationship. All stakeholders concurred that verbal and physical communication barriers have a negative effect on the relationship between incarcerated individuals and their companions and may result in feelings of isolation. Outside companions may not confide to their incarcerated partner about their emotions or the challenges they are facing to avoid placing undue pressure on them. Conversely, incarcerated individuals may find it difficult to be honest with their partners/carers about their feelings, addiction, and rehabilitation progress. For example, participant D stated that: “Some inmates refuse to disclose positive drug test results to their partners”; while participant E added: “One of my imprisoned clients had a severe disease that he wanted to keep secret from his girlfriend to save her from worrying about him.” Participant A indicated that many partners/carers on the outside feel that through their spouse’s illicit behaviour, their trust has been compromised due to the practical and financial burden being experienced, emotional betrayal, societal stigma, power imbalances in the relationship, and concerns for familial well-being. Intimate partner violence prior to imprisonment exacerbates the severity of the situation and compounds the complexity of compromised relationships.

Partners/carers may struggle to maintain communication with their jailed loved one, navigate the criminal justice system, and cope with the uncertainty of their future together, resulting in strained relationships. Morris [78] states that incarceration is a time for evaluating connections and is frequently the start of casual and unfulfilling encounters, particularly due to experiences of isolation and sexual deprivation [57]. As also acknowledged by the participants, male partners’ incarceration raises the likelihood of marriage breakup, impacting the whole family [34]. Yet, through adequate support structures and coping mechanisms, compromised and strained relationships can be reshaped and recast into healthier and stronger bonds.

5.5 Support and coping mechanisms

Participants highlighted that supporting partners/carers of the incarcerated is essential for their well-being since they often encounter distinct problems and obstacles because of their loved one’s imprisonment. Access to counselling and therapy services is not only important for those incarcerated to promote their rehabilitation and reintegration but also a crucial form of support for their partners/carers. In addition to housing and legal assistance, practical support

such as provision of caring responsibilities and assistance with financial, material and logistical matters can be of immense value.

Referring to the services that their organisation provides for the partners and families of inmates, the representatives from separate NGOs explained that they provide therapy and counselling services to partners and their children, while the other participants from public and governmental institutions mostly concentrate on the rehabilitation and reintegration of inmates, rather than their partners on the outside. In emphasising family support, participant D stated that significant others on the outside may not always pose a positive influence or act as prosocial models for those serving a prison sentence. The lack of a supportive social environment at 'home' may thus negatively sustain or re-instate the inmate's drug usage and anti-social habits. The participant declared that: *"I have had clients who, after being clean from drugs, start being a nuisance. If the wife uses drugs, that is added trouble; she must be clean to help the inmate."* Indeed, all entities recognise the importance of aiding the partner/carer as part of the rehabilitation objectives of the inmate. This aligns with the literature review, which suggests that individuals outside of prison who maintain romantic relationships with jailed partners may experience adverse psychological and physical health consequences. They may also struggle with developing and sustaining healthy behaviours and routines due to a lack of coping skills [72, 79].

Both NGOs provide shelter and accommodation through halfway houses for offenders in the last year of their confinement, in addition to providing free services such as emotional support and reintegration programmes. Halfway homes often provide more options for engagement with the external community, but with more stringent regulations in comparison to prisons. Participants A and C emphasised that to be eligible to serve the final year of their custodial sentence in the halfway house, inmates must maintain employment, adhere to curfew conditions, and demonstrate consistent rehabilitative and reintegrative efforts. This will gradually lead to incremented contact with their loved ones on the outside.

In addition, through their services, NGOs assist family members or partners of the incarcerated to avail of supportive interventions through referrals and joint sessions with other professionals, such as social workers, psychologists, or team meetings with other involved entities and community stakeholders. Participant A noted that any specific needs regarding the care and custody of children are directed to the Apogg Child Protection Services for family therapy, as they do not provide such services in-house. Participant C said that, as an NGO, they strive to demonstrate to the prisoner what he is losing by doing time while encouraging the partner/carer to remain supportive and enabling her to build empathy and trust, whilst empowering resilience and autonomy.

Both participants A and C highlighted the significance of gradual integration in aiding the incarcerated individual and their partner/carer to reconstruct their lives and strengthen their relationship. This process of gradual integration enables the couple to increasingly spend more time together, strengthen their bond, and find common ground. As a result, participants A and C strongly hold the belief that any care plan for the incarcerated should also include their significant others. Participants argued that the inclusion of the partner/carer in the care plan is crucial as the role played by significant others greatly impacts on the success of the jailed individual's rehabilitation and reintegration into society. This also helps to make the partners/carers more understanding and resilient. Participant C states: *"The challenge with the partners is also there, as is accepting what has been done and helping them restore what there was before if there is still a chance. We prepare both the prisoner and the partner for these difficulties."* Entities help couples acquire better interpersonal and communication skills, as such skills are pivotal for the rehabilitation of offenders and for the sustenance of the romantic/care relationship. Participant A said that jailed individuals routinely contact their partners while in jail, but when engaged in the programme, it is the family that generally initiates contact. This helps to assess the level of commitment from both sides and ensure higher-quality conversations. Participant A highlighted the significance of supporting the partners/carers during the transition phase of the incarcerated partner's release. As a result: *"We like to make that as clear as possible; we are not here working with the incarcerated only, but we are here trying to support you as well."*

These NGOs aspire to prevent or decrease repeat offences and recidivism by focusing on enhancing participants' prosocial behaviour and good social adaptation. According to Latessa and Travis [80], halfway houses reduce etiological factors that contribute to criminal behaviour, by providing access to social support through housing stability, education and employment opportunities, and self-improvement programmes. Addressing the psychological needs of prisoners during their transition phase is also given significant importance as it offers an effective correctional technique for the successful re-entry and reintegration of offenders [81].

6 Conclusion and recommendations

6.1 Discussion of findings

Partners of convicts are frequently hidden secondary victims of crime, as well as unacknowledged carer-givers to those within from the outside. They pay the social, psychological, and financial repercussions of their loved one's wrongdoing while being innocent of any criminal conviction. This study guided by the following research question; 'What are the challenges encountered by female carers/partners of the incarcerated within the Maltese context?' substantiates existing empirical evidence in the field. As in the case of other international studies, this research validates that the consequences of imprisonment go beyond confinement for the individual, since it exerts a profound impact on their close relations with family and significant others [14]. As in other contexts, in Malta having a partner in prison poses substantial and wide-ranging impact on several aspects of one's life, and is associated with significant psychological, social, economic, and emotional challenges for female partner/carers [27] with social stigma possibly being more pronounced due to the small close-knit community. Despite relatively affordable communication and insubstantial travelling costs due to Malta's small geographical area, as in other contexts female partners/carers of the incarcerated experience significant time-related burdens as well as stressors arising from the institutional barriers, processes and procedures of in-person visitation in correctional settings which impact negatively their romantic relationship [38].

A loved one's incarceration thus manifests itself in different forms of pain and challenges which impact quality of life such that partners/carers of the incarcerated often need holistic financial and psycho-social support. Such challenges often interrelate and compound, signifying the importance of adopting a holistic approach towards prevention and intervention [82]. However, research on partners of the incarcerated is significantly limited, particularly within the Maltese context, and further initiative is needed to provide better strategies, policies, and services.

6.2 Limitations of the study

Given this limited amount of research in this field within the Maltese context, the fundamental advantage of the adopted research strategy lies in its ability to gather ideas from subject matter experts who directly interact with prisoners' partners. The inclusion of professionals working in both public and non-governmental sectors across the areas of corrections and social welfare facilitated the exploration of diverse perspectives. However, the research is limited to a small-scale qualitative analysis which impedes the elicitation of broad generalisations. Another significant limitation is that it does not directly voice the experiences of partners of the incarcerated. To fully understand the impact of imprisonment on significant others, further study is thus necessary.

6.3 Recommendations for research, policy and practice

Further research needs to explicitly give voice to the partners/carers of the incarcerated themselves to hear directly their experiences, needs, and aspirations. Gaining insight into the inmate's experience is also vital for listening to the partner/dependent—the 'other' side of the relationship. Research in the field needs to extend beyond the nature and dynamics of heterosexual relationships to be inclusive of all justice-involved relationships, also by giving attention to how intersectionality shapes the individual experiences and realities of caring for those within from the outside. Addressing attention to the quality of relationships, the personality traits of spouses, the institutional barriers, and the contextual circumstances may provide added insight on the main risk as well as protective factors for enhanced relationships and wellbeing for both inmates and significant others and improved rehabilitative outcomes. As acknowledged by Durante et al. [26] in terms of prison visitation, understanding barriers is key for their effective redress. This would enable not only better understanding and analysis of the challenges faced by partners/carers of the incarcerated but also a more evidence-based approach to policy development and service provision in the field.

An actionable suggestion arising from this research is to consolidate existing family therapy programmes. These programmes, which need to begin from the moment of arrest and continue until release, must include partners/carers and any significant others in the lives of offenders, providing invaluable support throughout the whole criminal justice process. This significantly impacts the individual's rehabilitation and reintegration into society as well as supports the partners/carers through the challenges faced due to the incarceration of their loved ones. Effective interventions require

initiatives aimed at empowering partners/carers and strengthening their coping mechanisms and social networks [83]. Prisons urgently need more qualified personnel to assist both convicts and their spouses. Additional social welfare professionals are required inside the prison system to facilitate inmate rehabilitation and reintegration with the support of their wider family environment.

This research substantiates existing evidence that visits between inmates and loved ones are beneficial to both parties as they contribute to sustaining relationships and facilitate inmate rehabilitation with “the more positive the visitation experience, the greater the benefits” [84]. Yet, prison visitation entails several challenges for those on the outside. In addition to standard practical and bureaucratic hurdles and emotional turmoil, visitation entails added stresses arising from invasive body searches and other procedures. Visitation protocols need to be devised in such a way as to ensure correctional security whilst also fostering healthy and positive relationships between inmates and their significant others [85]. Correctional officers overseeing family visits need to be sensitized to the trauma of visitation [86] and the prioritization of a human rather than a security-oriented approach [87].

The practice of conjugal visits in Malta, enabling the couple to engage in intimate sexual encounters within the confines of the prison has been repealed in 2018 [88]. Howser et al. [89] revealed that male inmates in New York who engaged in family-reunion programs, including conjugal visits, demonstrated improved behaviour in comparison to those who did not partake in such programs. By fostering connections with their loved ones, these visits have a stabilising effect, which effectively reduced violence in custodial settings and better prepared prisoners for their reintegration into society after release [77, 90]. Moreover, by enabling the expression of sexual needs in a healthy manner, conjugal visits tend to foster mutual trust whilst reducing the likelihood of separation and divorce [91]. Female partners of male inmates tend to desire conjugal visits and extended family stay visits [59], yet may feel obliged, or psychologically and emotionally coerced to participate in such visits [92]. Intrusive control checks and impoverished prison environments may also contribute to unease and sense of oppression when visiting partners [77]. A rights-based approach to the implementation of conjugal visits in prisons giving consideration to reducing the burden and optimizing the benefits of such visits to all stakeholders, thus can serve as a valuable tool for reforming incarcerated offenders [93] in addition to safeguarding romantic/caring relationships.

The role of grassroots community organisations is pivotal for providing support to both inmates and their significant others. The establishment of non-governmental organisations aimed at aiding prisoners and their families, especially through support groups by ex-prisoners and their family members should be facilitated and encouraged [94]. Another noteworthy suggestion is a nationwide criminal justice reform emphasising a cultural change from a retributive to a more restorative justice approach to decrease stigmatisation and promote community integration [6].

The social disapproval associated with imprisonment is a substantial problem that can result in prejudice and impede the effective reintegration of previously jailed people into the community [95]. By confronting these negative stereotypes through educational initiatives and campaigns to increase awareness, we may establish a more inclusive atmosphere that promotes the rehabilitation and reintegration of individuals [96]. Such strategy should help to lessen the detrimental effects on families and carers of the incarcerated by encouraging compassion and greater understanding within the community [20].

Moreover, further policy attention needs to be addressed to acknowledge the significance of informal care provision with the aim of devising policies which appreciate and alleviate the multifaced challenges faced by informal carers, particularly those whose caregiving is challenged by uncertainties and lack of adequate support structures. Appreciation of care work needs to form part of wider gender anti-discrimination initiatives by promoting the ‘dual-earner/dual carer model’, especially in the context where the ‘male breadwinner model’ remains “one of the main impediments to gender equality in Malta” [97].

Collectively, by raising awareness, promoting training, enhancing service provision, and adopting policy and legislative reforms, these endeavours provide a framework for protecting both partners/carers and children from any further potential damage as well as promote the rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders.

6.4 Conclusion

Outside carers to those within require sustained support since despite being blameless, they are also affected by the criminal actions committed by their detained family members. The challenges encountered by this segment of the population are exceptionally challenging, cutting across the financial, material, social, psychological, and emotional domains. Partners/carers of incarcerated individuals not only encounter challenges faced by other carers such as burnout, but also deal with added strain across all domains of wellbeing. The absence of a partner can pose challenges for the

'single' parent partner/carer leading to additional complexities that the caregiver must navigate while also coping with their own grief and loss [20]. These challenges are often compounded by the stigma associated with incarceration [53].

Given the complexity and burdens arising from this romantic/care relationship, partners/carers may find themselves unable to cope and independently manage all the challenges they face, thereby requiring additional assistance and emotional support. Despite these challenges, through affirmative adaptive mechanisms, adequate support structures, and a more tolerant and accepting community, compromised relationships can be renewed to empower partners/carers to become more resilient whilst embracing the rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders. Such frameworks act as an important bridge between those 'within' and those who are caring for them from the 'outside'. The findings of this study demonstrate the necessity for increased awareness and comprehensive policy attention on this issue. Society should not shun impacted kin; instead, partner/carers should receive the appropriate level of assistance, empowerment and support in the recognition that, "*In prison, your loved ones "do the time" with you*" [98].

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Declarations

Informed consent Informed consent was obtained from all the participants involved in the study.

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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