

Shackled Love: The Lived Experience of Mothers Behind Bars from Pregnancy to ParenthoodElyza Kimberly Y. Villarante¹, Nicco Inri B. Palermo², Stephanie P. Miñoza³, Sonny Boy B. Bombio⁴,
Devianna Jane E. Daiz⁵(corresponding author)¹College of Nursing, Velez College, Philippines (ekvillarante@yahoo.com)²College of Nursing, Velez College, Philippines (palermonicco@gmail.com)³College of Nursing, Velez College, Philippines (honey_minzoa123@yahoo.com)⁴College of Nursing, Velez College, Philippines (sonnyboybombio@yahoo.com)⁵College of Nursing, Velez College, Philippines (deviannedaiz@gmail.com)

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experience of pregnant mothers behind bars. Affixed by the philosophy of Hans-Georg on hermeneutic phenomenology, individual semi-structured interviews were done with nine (9) informants. After transcribed interviews, reflection and interpretation were done with Max Van Manen's four lifeworlds. Six major themes emerged namely: (1) "Yearning Inmate" with subthemes: (a) "Corporeal Desire", and (b) "Familial Longingness"; (2) "The Long Journey Ahead" with subthemes: (a) "Mother's Preparation", and (b) "Prisoner's Delivery Experience"; (3) "The Value of Time"; (4) "The Separation" with subthemes: (a) "Sadness vs. Security", and (b) "Estranged"; (5) "To Light A Fire"; (6) "Somehow, Sometime, Someday" with subthemes: (a) "Hope: For Myself", and (b) "Hope: For my baby". Findings revealed how being a mother behind bars is no easy situation. They have several preparations to make before giving birth and just a few days after delivery, the baby is taken away. Over time, the child will no longer recognize them and so they try to mend the broken relationship they have.

Keywords: Motherhood, Imprisoned, Incarcerated, Interpretive phenomenology, Hermeneutics

INTRODUCTION

Pregnancy is generally a period of personal fulfillment and eager anticipation of the birth of a new child. Pregnant incarcerated women, however, are subjected to a variety of policies that negatively affect their pregnancy experiences.⁽¹⁾ One particular jail in Cebu City, known for their dancing inmates, is BJMP which caters to this group of women. These women are mostly incarcerated farther from their homes, making it harder for their family, friends, and children to visit. In addition, the controlled and limited environment contributes to their struggles in prison. In this study we explore the lived experience of mothers behind bars as told by 9 pregnant incarcerated women.

Background

Pregnancy and giving birth is a transformational time in a woman's life. Pregnant prisoners have health-care needs that are minimally met by prison systems.⁽²⁾ In the Philippines, pregnant inmates suffer most due to the prevailing prison conditions, such as problems regarding food rations and water supply, deficient health care services, medical negligence, congestion and its harmful effects to inmates, sleep deprivation, and lack of mobility.⁽³⁾ In addition, the relationship between parent and child is important.⁽²⁾ In most cases, mothers of newborn infants are permitted only a few days of contact before they must relinquish their infant and return to prison. As a result, there is little opportunity for the mother to develop a bond to the baby.⁽⁴⁾

Goal

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of pregnant women behind bars.

METHODS**Design**

We utilized a qualitative research specifically, interpretive phenomenology. We used HansGeorg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. Gadamer described interpretive process as hermeneutic circle where there is an understanding of the whole of a text in terms of its parts and the parts in terms of the whole. In his view, researchers enter into a dialogue with the text to continually question its meaning.

Settings and Informants

Our research setting for the study was the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP) Female Dormitory. We conducted the interviews in three different areas within the premises. These areas were the function hall, clinic and the grounds. We utilized maximum variation of purposive method sampling. Inclusion criteria included: (1) Mothers who were pregnant, became pregnant or delivered a live baby during imprisonment, (2) imprisoned mothers of 18 years old and above at the time of pregnancy, (3) obtained a score of 15 and below for depression screening test. Exclusion criteria included: (1) showed signs of depression, mentally incapacitated and disturbed, (2) hearing and speaking disability, (3) whose pregnancy resulted to abortion, intrauterine death or neonatal death. A total of 12 possible informants were initially identified. Among the 12, nine (9) informants passed the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CESD) tool. Data was saturated at the 5th informant. Data saturation is sampling to the point at which there was redundancy of the answers or no new data received from the informants.⁽⁵⁾ We interviewed four additional informants for validation.

Data Collection

We submitted a transmittal letter with protocol to seek approval from the dean of Velez College-College of Nursing and to the BJMP. Prior to data collection, we had our self-awareness activity that was conducted by our adviser. This was for us to become aware of our preconceived notions which could affect the data of our study. We also had a mock interview. The informant was a previous inmate of BJMP who experienced a similar phenomenon of being a mother. We used a researcher made interview guide with a grand tour question "Take me back to the time that you knew you were pregnant while in prison" and suggestions were also put into consideration. During interviews, we each played different roles, one for audio recording, another taking down notes, another noting nonverbal cues and one to ask the questions. We initially established rapport and interviewed the informants at their scheduled hours at three different times on three different days with respect to their availability and preference. We made a reflexive journal at the end of the day of the interview. All interview questions were translated into Cebuano and the collected data were transcribed and analyzed. After each interview, we gave the informants a token of appreciation.

Ethical Considerations

We gave a transmittal letter to BJMP to achieve their permission while informing the plans and procedures of the study. We conducted a depression screening tool to the potential informants and those who met the criteria. We also have consent forms which contained the significance and purpose of the study, time allotted for the interview, possible risk of consenting to participate in the study, the informants' right, and a section which states that participation is entirely voluntary, that anytime they have the right to withdraw from the study. It also included measures to promote confidentiality and that no monetary rewards will be given. A token was given to informants and words of gratitude and appreciation were expressed by the researchers toward the selected informants and the authorities in BJMP. The informants were given the opportunity to express what they felt during the interview. In addition, after data analysis, we went back to the BJMP to meet with each informant to verify the identified themes.

Data Analysis

We utilized Max van Manen's method of data analysis. Van Manen's four aspects of lived experience were also used as a guide in the study. These aspects included lived space or spatiality, lived body or corporeality, lived time, or temporality and lived human relation, or relationality. We uncovered the thematic aspects of the experience through holistic approach, selective approach and detailed approach. In the holistic approach, we viewed the text as a whole and tried to capture its meaning. Meanwhile in the selective approach, we highlighted statements or phrases that were essential to the experience. Lastly in the detailed approach, we analyzed every sentence documented. Once themes have been identified, we reflected and interpreted the data through follow-up interviews. After reaching consensus on the themes identified, we again examined the transcript segments to ensure they supported the themes. We considered the themes robust if no more themes emerged during the data analysis.⁽⁵⁾

RESULTS

Table 1. Profile of the Informants

Informants	Age	No. of children	AOG upon imprisonment	Child’s age	Time Together before Separation
Nica	21	1	4 months	6 months	5 days
Mai	22	2	8 months	3 yrs	3 days
Mary	23	1	3 months	2 yrs	2 days
Esel	24	3	3 months	1 yr	1 night
Alyn	28	3	7 months	3 yrs	5 days
Gel	29	2	3 weeks	1 yr	5 days
Anna	31	5	4 months	2 yrs.	5 days
Marmar	34	3	4 months	3 yrs	5 days
Nice	36	6	8 months	2 yrs & 11 mos	2 days

Analysis of the data gathered from our nine (9) informants yielded six (6) major themes:

Theme 1: “Yearning Inmate”

Inmates are limited to services the institution offers. This theme reflects how inmates spend their days yearning for what they cannot always have. It contains two subthemes, (a) “Corporeal Desires” which presents how the informants craved for physical needs during pregnancy as Gel expressed, *“Bisag unsa na food i-crave. Lisud man kay kasagaran mu crave kog food inig ka gabii naman, kanang di na ta pwede makatawag.”* [I craved for random kinds of food. It’s usually hard because I crave for food during the night when we cannot make phone calls.] and (b) “Familial Longingness” which shows how the informants prayed to see their loved ones during visitation days, though this in itself was a challenge as Marmar shared, *“Makasabot ra man pud ko nganong dili sila maka dalaw sa akoo. Layo man pud diri-a nya mahal pud kaayo, mag kas ra sila og pamiliti. Maypa ila na lang na gamiton ilang pamiliti sa ilang pag eskuwela”* [I can understand why my children can’t come to visit me. It’s far from our house and the fare is quite expensive. I would rather have them spend their money for school purposes only].

Theme 2: “The Long Journey Ahead”

The informants went through different preparations and were placed into unique delivery experiences, which led them to two subthemes, (a) “Mother’s Preparation” which presents the informants making further plans since their expected date of delivery was approaching as Anna shared, *“Katong wala pa ko manganak naay DA Narcotics nya sa ila pud ko mag pa prenatal og sila pud ang nag finance sa akong pagpanganak. Pagkahibaw nila na di pa nako kaya ibuhì siya ila kong gi refer sa Blue Ribbon.”* [When I was still pregnant, a religious organization called DA Narcotics assisted me during my prenatal check-ups and opted to finance my delivery. Knowing that I was not financially capable of raising the child yet, they referred me to a foundation.] and (b) “Prisoner’s Delivery Experience” which presented the informants’ unique birthing experiences as shared by Alyn, who gave birth in the hallway outside the prison cells, *“Ig human bilang mga alas onse, padlock na, wa nay mga tawo. Bale ang nakakita ato, ako rang mga kauban. Ang uban ato nagpaminaw ra sila. Mingaw baya, mulinog jud ang tingog. Nauwaw gani ko ato kay pagkabuntag ato nay niingon na “Saba nimo manganak oy.” Mauwaw sad ta.”* [After a headcount at eleven, prison cells are locked and no one is to wander around. Those who saw me give birth were my roommates. The other inmates were listening to me. The place is silent and my screams would echo around. I felt ashamed because the next day, someone approached me and said, “You were so noisy when you gave birth.” I felt ashamed.] Nice, who gave birth in a government hospital, was distracted during labor by the doctor’s questions regarding her case. She shared, *“Ni ana dayun tong doctor nga “Piniriso diay ka?” Nya sige siyag pangutana. Kapoya sad aning doktora oy, sigeg pangutana, unsay akong kaso, nganong na ing-ani.”* [The doctor then said, “Oh, so you’re a prisoner?” She kept asking questions. She was so annoying. She kept asking what my case was and how I got to my current situation.]

Theme 3: “The Value of Time”

It has always been the policy of the institution to prohibit infants from staying in prison since it was not a healthy environment for a child to grow up in. A few days after birth, the child would be taken from the mother. This theme presents how the informants cherished the limited time they had with their child. To the first time

mothers, they spent the few days learning to take care of their baby. Mary stated, “*First man nako siya nga baby. Ganahan kaayo ko mu-ilis niya ug diaper. Kanang ma feel nako nga mama ko niya.*” [He was my first baby. I really like changing his diaper. It makes me feel like I’m his mother.]

Theme 4: “The Separation”

As the children were taken away from their mothers, over time, they grew up someplace else, and no longer recognized their own mothers. This theme involves two other subthemes, (1) “Sadness vs Security” wherein the informants were pained when the actual time of separation came as Marmar, who placed her child for adoption, expressed, “*Sukad pagkuha nila ato sa akong anak, mga one year to usa pako naka dawat.*” [It took around one year for me before I accepted the fact that they took away my baby.] The informants, however, had faith with the idea that their child would be in better hands. Marmar further shared, “*Kagustuhan pud nako nga gi butang nako sa DSWD ang bata kay tiguwang na man akong mga ginikanan. Para sad to iyang kaugmaon kay wala man ko kahibaw sa akong kaso kung maunsa ni.*” [It was my choice to place the child in DSWD because my parents are also old. When I placed her in DSWD, it was for her future because I do not know what will become of my case.] The second subtheme, (2) “Estranged”, presents how the mothers grow apart from their children as time passed. What pained most informants was the reality that their child would not call them “Mama” but would be addressed by either their first name, “Tita” [Auntie] or “Ate” [Sister]. Mai recalled conversation she had with her daughter: “*Love nimo si Mama Dai?*” [Do you love mommy?] and her daughter replied, “*Ay, di uy. Wala man ka. Naa diay ka?*” [Of course not. You’re never there. Are you ever around?]

Theme 5: “To Light a Fire”

One of the challenges that the informants are faced was maintaining a connection with her child. This theme presents how the informants compensated by making the most of visiting hours. Others show their love by their constant phone calls. Esel also shared, “*Kanang taga kita namo ako lang jud siya hatagan sa mga ganahan niya ba para dili jud siya ingun nga malimot ana ba*” [Everytime we meet, I just give her the things she wants for her not to forget me.]

Theme 6: Somehow, Sometime, Someday

Amidst the difficulty of being behind bars, the informants shared their dreams for the future in two subthemes, (1) “Hope: For Myself” which presents their dreams for themselves as Gel expressed, “*Kung naa siguroy chance, ako jud atimanan akong anak, tarungon nako pag atiman na dili siya ma pareha nako*” [If given the chance, I will really take good care of my children so they don’t end up like me.] and (2) “Hope: For My Baby” which shows how the informants had their children in their prayers as Anna shared, “*Mag ampo ko na maayo ilang panglawas. Na provide lang ilang pagkaon sa matag adlaw. Mao na akong gi ampo sa Ginoo na bisan wala ko di unta sila pasagdan ba.*” [I will pray for their health. I hope they have food to eat everyday. I pray that even though I’m not around, my children will not be neglected.]

DISCUSSION

Yearning Inmate. Imprisonment can mean loss of benefits that are troublesome. Because of their overwhelming needs, transition in prison can be especially challenging for women. Pregnant women are not immune to general cravings.⁽⁶⁾ Not all kinds of food are readily available in prison. This made it a difficult experience for the informants. In addition, inmates serving significant amount of time would be concerned with real limitations in their environment including access to family, interesting work, and stimulating activities.⁽⁷⁾

The Long Journey Ahead. In preparation for delivery, pregnant inmates depend on correctional authorities for their health care, and correctional authorities are legally obligated to meet those needs.⁽⁸⁾ Prison facilities in the Philippines have policies regarding care for the pregnant inmate in preparation for her delivery which includes available dormitories rooms for female inmates as well as materials for specific hygiene needs and regular check-ups in a government hospital provided a court order is secured for the purpose.⁽⁹⁾ During delivery, personal expectations, support from caregiver’s and caregiver-patient relationship are strong considerations that affect women’s evaluation of the experience.⁽¹⁰⁾ Women have much to say about the attitude of the healthcare staff. They are very critical because they feel that disrespectful and uncaring attitude of staff is not appropriate for the caring professions.⁽¹¹⁾

The Value of Time. Bonding refers to the special attachment that forms between a mother and the new baby. Permitting incarcerated women to stay with their young children encourages the mother-child relationship which is fundamental to the child's cognitive and emotional development.⁽¹²⁾ Jail is not the ideal place to raise a child but separating mothers from newborns is also detrimental to both mother and child.⁽¹³⁾ Even until today, it is debatable whether mothers can raise their children in jail.

The Separation. Many pregnant women who deliver while incarcerated are almost immediately separated from their newborns after delivery. The infants are then either placed with relatives or in foster care and the mothers are returned to prison or jail.⁽¹⁴⁾ While a mother is incarcerated, it may be difficult, if not impossible, for her to remain connected to her children. Visits are impossible because of logistical problems: for instance, the prison is situated too far away or transportation is unavailable.⁽¹⁵⁾ The limited and inadequate quality of that contact and the stigma and shame associated with being the child of a prisoner can make retaining a relationship with a parent very difficult.⁽¹⁶⁾

To Light a Fire. Mothers must be present and accessible in order for their children to become attached to them. The lack of accessibility is referred to either separation or loss, depending on whether it is temporary or permanent in.⁽¹⁷⁾ The informants try to compensate for their absence in different ways. Unable to provide their physical presence, the inmates send gifts to their child.

Somehow, Sometime, Someday. Thoughts about the outside world led informants to reflect on the way they had been prior to incarceration and how they would live differently today if released.⁽¹⁸⁾ People often think that hope thrives only on visions of good things tucked behind the curtain of the future.⁽¹⁹⁾ Hope however, can still be found even in the hardest situations, as proven by the informants of the study. Mothers would not want to see their children making the same mistakes as them. They want them to find their passion and follow it no matter where it goes.⁽²⁰⁾

CONCLUSION

Being a mother behind bars is no easy situation. These women experience pregnancy in an unfamiliar environment without the company of their loved ones. Their delivery experiences are unique. These mothers are able to feel the elation of holding her child for the first time, but also feel the anguish of being separated from him after a few days. They experience what we consider a shackled love. Though they long to be with their children and pour out all the love they have, their opportunities are limited as they remain behind bars. What is inspiring is the reality that these mothers continue to hope for a future where they become better people, reunited with their children. We recommend, to the society and health care providers, to give their utmost care as well as understanding and support which the mothers need. To the jail officers and administration, it would also be of great help for the families of the informants to be provided with free transportation, may it be private or public at least once a month in order for them to visit their loved ones. To the support systems, we recommend to spend time with the imprisoned member by visiting them in the jail. To the future researchers, we recommend to conduct a study regarding fathers behind bars or on children whose parent is incarcerated.

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