

# The Motherhood Experiences of Women Incarcerated at the Johannesburg Maximum Correctional Facility, in the Gauteng Province, South Africa

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## Abstract

The percentage of female offenders who are single mothers of minor children is a growing concern among the total incarcerated population in South Africa and globally. This study aimed to explore how expectations about mothering manifest for incarcerated mothers who are physically separated from their children. The experience of motherhood was captured using face-to-face interviews with a guide of semi-structured questions with eight (8) incarcerated mothers at Johannesburg correctional facility, Gauteng province, South Africa. The data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) couched with Social Identity Theory (SIT) and revealed that circumstances that led to maternal pathways differed from the literature. The findings of this study provided a foundation of how the social context, together with maternal obligation, influences behaviors that women internalize, and which lead to offending behaviors. This warrants further research in an effort to curb and prevent maternal incarceration.

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single mother, separation, motherhood, maternal obligation, minor children, incarceration, social identity theory, South Africa

**Introduction**

The topic of women in conflict with the law is often less documented in literature globally and locally due to the perception that it stereotypically generalizes feminine identity as part of the caregiving role rather than being a perpetrator (Qhogwana, 2019). United States (US) literature (Easterling, 2012) corresponds with local research. Van Zyl Smit and Dunkel (2001, p. 589) have observed that “there has been no systematic study of the imprisonment of women in South Africa or of the regime to which they are subject.” On the other hand, the investigation into female offending, predominantly in South Africa, focuses on Western and European knowledge while leaving no room for localized knowledge to be explored (Artz & Rotmann, 2015; Dastile & Agozino, 2019). Nonetheless, documentation of the female population rate by Walmsley (2017) over more than a decade from 2000 to 2016 has pointed out that the total number of incarcerated women is increasing globally by 20%. According to Walmsley (2017), Americans contribute to the highest percentage of an estimated 8.4% population of female offenders, while Africans make up a small segment of 3%. Despite the difference in the percentage of incarceration rate that exists between the two nations, the commonality in the literature shows that most detained women (60%–80%) are mothers of minor children (Easterling et al., 2019; Koons-Witt et al., 2021; Sapkota et al., 2022).

Research in South Africa (SA) (Artz & Hoffman-Wanderer, 2017; Parry, 2020) and the US (Koons-Witt et al., 2021; Walmsley, 2017) has shown that incarcerated mothers are likely to be single mothers who come from poor backgrounds, have low levels of education, have experienced victimization, have the primary responsibility of providing for their children, and are likely to be breadwinners in their families. Poor socio-economic conditions, exacerbated by the burden of maternal responsibilities, are cited as justifications for economic crimes by incarcerated mothers (Artz & Hoffman-Wanderer, 2017; Easterling et al., 2019; Parry, 2022). On the other hand, victimization literature (Nuytiens & Christiaens, 2016) shows that the commission of violent crimes was linked to staying in a prolonged abusive relationship, which influenced women to act aggressively for the sake of protecting their children from their abuser. Bachman et al. (2016) explain that the act of caring, which is aligned with the elements of maternal obligation, has predisposed women to commit crimes for the sake of their children.

Women’s entry into the justice system may evoke feelings of loss of identification due to being physically separated from their children (Stringer, 2020). Robust literature (Easterling et al., 2019; Tadros & Presley, 2022) has shown that women who are incarcerated are inclined to experience stigma that has the likelihood of devaluing their maternal identities. The idea of mothering for incarcerated mothers has not changed from the dominant societal expectations of motherhood (Easterling et al.,

2019). However, societal ideologies of motherhood in the outside community may create stereotypes and stigma that contradict the realities of performing a maternal role inside bars (Garcia-Hallet, 2019; Stringer, 2020).

Furthermore, there is insufficient research to address the effect of the criminal justice system on the development of maternal identity or experience (Sapkota et al., 2022). Current existing studies that documented the impact of incarceration on role and identity (Baldwin & Epstein, 2017; Garcia-Hallet, 2019; Hoskins & Cobbina, 2020; Sapkota et al., 2022) could not address the experiences of distanced women co-mothering with the caregiver of their children (Easterling et al., 2019; Tadros & Presley, 2022). Therefore, it is worth exploring the experiences of women co-mothering behind bars, which was the central focus of this study and will inform women's efforts in reconstructing and negotiating their identities (Easterling et al., 2019; Mitchell & Davis, 2019). Even though imprisonment poses a threat to maternal identification due to its association with criminal identity, motherhood remains the most important identity (Baldwin, 2021; Stringer, 2020).

## **Literature Review: Mothering as a Construct of Maternal Contact**

According to Lockwood (2020), motherhood is a socially constructed concept that outlines role responsibility for women who have biological dependents, adopted children, or older people raising their siblings. As suggested by Bangkok Rule 23 (United Nations Criminal Justice Handbook Series, 2014), incarcerated women may perform their mothering role in close proximity by co-residing with the child in the Mother Baby Unit (MBU) within the correctional facility. Allowing the child to co-reside with the mother, according to Garcia-Hallet (2019), Poehlmann-Tynan and Turney (2021), Powell et al. (2017), and Sapkota et al. (2022), reduces the effects of the devastation caused by separation from the child, while, in turn, increasing the likelihood of a diminished attachment bond, thus increasing their self-esteem in their mothering role. Despite MBUs being necessary for maintaining maternal ties, there is a debate internationally (Kennedy et al., 2020; Poehlmann-Tynan & Turney, 2021; Powell et al., 2017; Sapkota et al., 2022) and locally (Eloff & Moen, 2003) that revolves around the context of incarceration being an ineffective way to raise a child given the challenges and rules in correctional facilities that affect children's development.

Nonetheless, women who mother in proximity are separated from their child when they reach the maximum cut-off age as prescribed by laws and policies of co-residing correctional facilities, for example, the Correctional Service Amendment Act of 2008 (CSA Act) in South Africa (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2008) and the Adoption and Safe Family Act (1997). In South Africa, the cut-off age for a child to co-reside with their mother is 2 years old, while in the US, it may be 18 months. Diverging from the ASF Act (1997), the CSA Act (RSA, 2008) does not legislate that a child whose mother is unable to provide as a caregiver during placement should be placed into the childcare system with the possibility of being adopted by an unknown family, which

increases the chances of permanently losing custodial rights and a lack of contact. Poehlmann-Tynan & Pritzl (2019) and Sapkota et al. (2022) argue that, unlike foster homes, maternal grandmothers refrain from seeking legal custody when they are placed with the child because they believe that changing custodial rights symbolizes the inability of the mother to care for her child, and a change of custody changes the family structure.

After incarcerated mothers separate from the child, they were residing either at a correctional facility or home, they may desire to continue with their maternal role responsibilities at a distance by jointly co-mothering with the caregiver (Aiello & McQueeney, 2021; Stringer, 2020; Wilson et al., 2023). Some authors in the US like Cooper-Sadlo et al. (2019), Poehlmann-Tynan and Turney (2021) and Sapkota et al. (2022), have cited that correctional institutions may also support female offenders to facilitate their mothering role at a distance through the establishment and implementation of contact programs between the caregiver of the child and the mother. According to Aiello and McQueeney (2021), Tadros and Presley (2022), and Wilson et al. (2023), positive cooperation between the mother and caregiver influences the effectiveness of the co-mothering relationship, which in turn increases the chances of receiving frequent physical visitation, which strengthens maternal identification and role. On the other hand, the lack of cooperation explained by Aiello and McQueeney (2021). Wilson et al. (2023) and Tadros and Presley (2022) may result in limited contact, as the caregiver may perceive their relationship as harmful, thus weakening the maternal identity.

In some cases, South African authors (Artz & Rotmann, 2015; Du Preez, 2006; Luyt, 2008) indicated that some women offenders may negatively influence their potential of having a relationship and communication with their children while detained. Du Preez (2006) articulates that the preference for refusing visitation comes from the desire of the offending mother “to spare the children the trauma of separation and of having to say goodbye, p. 30,” while Parry (2018, p. 61) discovered that “it was a relief to be incarcerated for some mothers who had been primary providers and caregivers to their dependents or children, but they felt guilty about that relief and did not want to be separated from their children.”

Research evidence (Cooper-Sadlo et al., 2019; Poehlmann-Tynan & Turney, 2021; Sapkota et al., 2022) articulates that contact can be affected by travel and telephonic costs, which may lead to infrequent contact, thus weakening the maternal identity. According to research (Baldwin, 2021; Poehlmann-Tynan & Turney, 2021; Stringer, 2020), incarcerated mothers who lack educational attainment are affected by their limited literate capacity to use letters to communicate with the child’s caregivers. Some incarcerated mothers, as articulated by Stringer (2020), may begin to initiate their first contact with their child for the first time while they are incarcerated, while others maintain their pre-existing contact. Incarcerated mothers who had never been in contact with the child/children before incarceration may be required to deal with emotions such as rejection, anxiety, embarrassment, or resentment immediately after their first contact with their children (Birc et al., 2018; Stringer, 2020), while incarcerated mothers who have pre-existing relationships and had contact with their children before

incarceration, as emphasized by Stringer (2020) and Birc et al. (2018), may experience emotions such as separation alienation, depression, and guilt or shame for having restrictions of contacting their children.

Easterling's (2012) study, which focuses on the influences of the context of imprisonment on offender maternal identity and relationships with 49 participants at a Kentucky Correctional Service for Women, USA, has shown that 66% of incarcerated women are in contact with the children, 34% have lost contact with the children, and 61% have never received a visit from the children. This is also similar to the SA context, which shows that Luyt's (2008) study at Pollsmoor Correctional Facility, Western Cape Province, South Africa, confirmed that few participants in the study, 31.34% ( $n=21$ ), had some form of contact with all their children, while 65.15% ( $n=43$ ) indicated that they had lost contact with their children or at least some of their children. Furthermore, most of the women ( $n=64$ ) in Luyt's (2008) study indicated that they did not receive physical visitation contact from their children. Schubert et al.'s (2016) study articulated that frequent physical visitation contacts between the female offender and the child results in lower levels of depression, anxiety, somatization, and high self-esteem.

## Methodology

The study used qualitative phenomenology as a research design because of its ability to reveal the unexpected lived experiences of the participants and the meaning attached to the phenomenon within a specific context (Alase, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Villanueva & Gayoles, 2019). Phenomenology was chosen as a compatible research methodology because it has been shown to be effective when working with vulnerable populations such as incarcerated mothers in the current study such as Tadros et al. (2023) and Alirezai and Roudsari (2022). Similar to the current studies, Mitchell and Davis (2019) and Tadros et al. (2023) recommended that a sample size of eight qualitative research participants was sufficient to produce nuanced data on participants' mothering experiences. The participants in the study were chosen purposively at the Johannesburg Maximum correctional facility based on the inclusion criteria of being a mother who has performed their mothering role prior to and during imprisonment.

## Data Collection

The Department of Correctional Service (DCS) research ethics committee and the University of South Africa research ethics committee both approved the data collection. The DCS provided access to study participants by appointing a guide from the DCS psychology department who introduced the research site at various sections where women are housed at correctional facilities. Following that, an appointment was made with the contact person to visit the research site and introduce the study to participants. Presenting the research study to women at various housing sections during the visitation period gave them an equal opportunity to learn about the study, ask questions about the topic, and consider whether they wanted to participate (Parry, 2022). I

assured the participants that the guide had signed a confidentiality non-disclosure agreement form and that there would be no hard copy evidence that would be disclosed to other members of correctional services who spoke to the guide about my study. To take part in the audio-recorded interviews, they would have to provide written consent during the face-to-face sessions, which took place in a private space at the correctional facility to maintain privacy and confidentiality. For the sake of anonymity, the women in the study used pseudonyms during face-to-face interviews, and their narratives were guided by semi-structured interview questions which were approved by the DCS research committee.

## **Participants**

At the time of the interviews, the eight participants in the study were mothers from the ages of 25 to 55 years old with minor children and who served their time as maximum offenders at the Johannesburg correctional facility. Many of the participants ( $n=7$ ) were from black racial backgrounds, and one was from a white racial group. Three of the women had the experience of being mothers in proximity in the context of a correctional facility, while five were mothers at a distance. The majority of the women's ( $n=8$ ) children were placed with their maternal grandmothers; in the case where the maternal grandmother was deceased, the children were then taken into the custody of their maternal aunt. The marital status of most of them was single ( $n=7$ ), while the other participant ( $n=1$ ) was married. The mothers in the study were primarily responsible for providing financial care to their children and extended family members while their partners were supplementing their income. The lack of educational attainment for seven women in the study caused them to be employed at lower-paying jobs, while one has a good job and good educational background. Women in the study ( $n=8$ ) had a history of experiencing abuse in their domestic context.

## **Data Analysis**

The transcriptions derived from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed by the Interpretative Phenomenology (hermeneutics phenomenology) Analysis (IPA). IPA was best suited as a method of analysis because of its compatibility with the theoretical framework of the study, SIT, and the social constructionist paradigm, as they all primarily focus on how the context influences the essence attached to a social phenomenon that is shaped by language while individuals are socially interacting with one another. IPA allowed me to construct interpretations of the participants' experiences based on the process of double hermeneutics, which entails participants attempting to understand their reality while the researcher wants to understand the participants who strive to understand their world (Alase, 2017). The inductive nature of IPA, as emphasized by Alase (2017), created an opportunity for me to be able to identify unforeseen ideas and themes from participants' experiences rather than imposing on theories.

## Findings of the Study

In contextualizing the experiences of women, and the meaning attached to motherhood, different themes emerged from my study. For this research study the focus was on four themes, namely *Theme 1: Physical abuse and maternal obligation*, *Theme 2: Effect of incarceration on relationship and maternal identity*, *Theme 3: Women reconstruction of identity, role*, and *Theme 4: Telephone calls as a means of contact*, which was aligned with the research needs.

### *Theme 1: Physical Abuse and Maternal Obligation*

Relating to Mitchell and Davis's (2019) study, the situation of being economically deprived influence women's behavior of being self-sacrificing as a means of survival for themselves and their children despite the circumstance in which they may find themselves. Unathi, a 46-year-old single mother of two adult children and one minor child, who worked as a nanny, said that "It is because I don't want anything that has to do with my children. If you want to distress me, then touch my children and then you will see me. . . he threw himself on my child, he has done a lot of things, I was annoyed, and I was overwhelmed with emotions I did what I wasn't supposed to do."

The participants in the study perceived physically abusive behavior that was perpetrated on them as being normal without taking into consideration the mental effect that it has on them. This assumption is substantiated by Buhle, a 33-year-old single mother of two minor children, who voiced that "Yes, because if I didn't look at the side of being a mother who protects her kids, what should I have done, I would have stayed with that person. I choose that I rather talk so that I make sure that this monster is not in front of my children." It is also evident from the discussion with incarcerated women (Buhle, Mmapaseka, Unathi, and Uthando) that they were more responsive to the experience of abuse when it was perpetrated on their children than on themselves. In addition, women's identity of being a protector, which is in line with the intensive mothering role, was evoked in threatening situations that were perceived to be harmful to their children, which distorted their morality of making rightful decisions that were law-abiding. This was illustrated by Mmapaseka, a 35-year-old mother of one minor child, who provided the following comment:

This is our first child, both of us, then he forced me that I must do abortion, then I refused. I refused to do an abortion then we fought . . . he keeps on following me even though I was at home, he used to beat me when I was pregnant. I end up committing crime.

### *Theme 2: Effect of Incarceration on Relationship and Maternal Identity*

Women act on being selfless, which was in line with the elements of intensive mothering and had implications on both their physical presence and relationships with their children (Easterling et al., 2019; Kennedy et al., 2020; Mitchell & Davis, 2019). In describing how incarceration has affected their relationships, women in their mid-30s

(Buhle, Lesego, Lebogang, and Stacy) stated that disclosure about women's involvement in criminal activities and whereabouts brought about their relationships with their minor children and caregiver to remain the same. Before incarceration, women had a close relationship with their caregiver and their children, which could explain their stability. Furthermore, the women's (Buhle, Lesego, Lebogang, and Stacy) openness about their stay in the correctional Centre was a way that they used to control information that is being fed to their children, which has the potential to disrupt their relationships. This above statement was supported by Buhle's remarks, who said that "I wanted to have a very good relationship with my children, I wanted to make them understand what happened so that they wouldn't hear about my case from other people in the streets because in my case my children are the victim."

Even though women's relationships with their children did not change, the context of incarceration contributed to the modification of their identities as distant co-mothers. These identities were developed as a consequence of physical isolation, their partial involvement in their children's lives, and their role of cooperating with the caregiver of the child. This was exemplified by Stacy, a 34-year-old, White single mother of three minor children, who was employed as an Optometrist and lived in Johannesburg suburbs. She shared that "she [her sister] is basically . . . If I could explain it to you in this way, she's headquartered and I'm a branch and she has to come and visit that branch. That's how you feel. You feel like she's got all these responsibilities and she has to fit you in somewhere."

Stacy's shared responsibility, as well as effective communication with the caregiver of the child, relates to literature (Tadros & Presley, 2022) on the elements of the positive cooperating relationship. The discussion about their identification as co-distant mothers had led women to wonder about who they are going to be after they are released. Offender mothers' doubts about their identity upon release manifested in feelings of concern, frustration, and pain. Stacy said, "when I go home my son is going to be busy writing his matric exams, my daughter is going to be 16 and my baby is going to be 12. What are they going to say to me, are they going to accept me and say mother or are they going to maintain this long-distance relationship, that is my biggest fear." These feelings of ambiguity regarding women's identification post-incarceration emanated from their curiosity about whether they were going to be accepted or rejected by their children.

### *Theme 3: Women Reconstruction of Identity and Role*

Further, distance co-mother evaluation of their involvement in crime and physical isolation contributed to their construction of identity as bad mothers. This is related to Berry and Smith-Mahdi's (2012) conception of a bad mother, which is grounded on physical absence in their children's lives, which is a direct consequence of their conflicting behavior with the justice system. Stacy said: ". . . because you must remember to be a good mother you have to be present, I am not present, I am a long-distance mother, I am not a good mother . . ." The above representation cited by Stacy is further explained by Hoggs et al.'s (2017) quote on SIT, which indicates the identification of

offender mothers as being bad due to their involvement in criminality relative to mothers who are law-abiding citizens. Moreover, the construction of a bad mother identity, according to the participants, was drawn from deviating from the normative behavioral role responsibility of caring for their children. The lack of attention to their children, which fosters behaviors of non-caring, contributed to the expression of a bad mother, which is highlighted by Stacy: “And then you take attention completely away from them and move it to something or somebody else because my children could have been dead and it would have been in my hands, that is a bad mother.”

Women’s perception of themselves as either bad mothers or distance-co mothers did not influence them from being concerned about their children. Echoing the sentiment of Celinska and Sigal (2010), the act of concern was a way that women attempted to negotiate to be good mothers to their children. The above statement collaborates with group identification in SIT, which demonstrates that the offender mothers’ evaluation of self as either being good or bad was relative to those mothers who were outside the correctional facility (Haslam et al., 2009). The concern over the well-being of their children was highlighted by wondering if their children were coping or whether or not their children were safe despite having a good relationship with their children. Uthando, a 52-year-old single mother of one minor child and two adult children, who worked as a general worker, said that “. . . it is not easy, sometimes they speak on television about the condition of the male correctional facility, sometimes I stress about how my child will be like after he is released from the correctional facility.” The nature of the context of incarceration has made it difficult for women to care for their children behind bars, which means that the only thing left to ensure that the children are well taken care of was to communicate with the caregiver of the child.

#### *Theme 4: Telephone Calls as a Means of Contact*

Telephonic contact was an alternative method of communication during COVID-19 lockdown restrictions that women used to keep in touch with and continue to play out their roles as mothers. Incarcerated mothers’ access to telephones did not mean that they could automatically reach out to their children because they also need to buy white call vouchers to make a call. Women in the study ( $n=8$ ) had challenges with the cost associated with making a telephone call and a need to express themselves in the limited time of 30 minutes. In describing the experience of bonding with a child over the telephone, Mmapaseka expressed that: “So it’s painful, to bond with the child over the phone [pause] and sometimes when you are about to call, the child wants to play during the day, he wants to play, I will talk to you during the day, I will talk to you tomorrow . . . call in the evening he does not understand that I can’t call.”

Unathi added that: “Yes, I can call them but something she is a person who does not like phones too much, when I call her, it goes straight to voicemail.” Unathi and Mmapaseka’s narratives reflect on the role strain that mothers experience as the result of having different reality times which is affecting their ability to make telephonic contact (Garcia-Hallet, 2019). The caregiver of the minor child, on the other hand, cannot reverse the call in case they have missed it. Women in the study pointed out that

even though they had a chance to communicate with their children during weekends via telephone, the time was not really enough to catch up on events that occurred throughout the week. This caused them to miss out on the important aspects of their child's development. Women collectively expressed that the feeling of missing out on their children's milestone developments was associated with being physically absent, distant mothers. To support the statement above, Unathi shared the following remarks: "My third born is turning 13, she will be a teenager, anytime soon, she experiences her menstrual period, and I won't be there."

From what I have gathered from the participants' narrative above is that it seems like they wanted to be present when their children experienced their first milestone developments. There was a specific knowledge that women in the study wanted reserved to share with their children, especially when they reached the teenage stage, for example talks, diseases, hygiene, or how to behave as teenagers. The important aspect of socializing their children into their teenage years was actually performed by the caregivers of their children rather than by them, which was painful for women in the study because they could only participate partially in this responsibility. The above representation reflects the typical attributes of the mother's role of caring about their children's lives, despite the physical isolation or realities that they encounter while making contact.

Furthermore, women's development of a bad mother identity was further influenced by their physical isolation and criminal activity. This is connected to Berry and Smith-Mahdi's (2012) idea of a bad mother, which is based on the mother's physical absence from her children's lives, which is a direct result of her conflicting behavior with the legal system. Stacy said: ". . . because you must remember to be a good mother you have to be present, I am not present, I am a long-distance mother, I am not a good mother . . ." The above representation cited by Stacy is further explained by the quote from Hoggs et al. (2017) on SIT, which indicates that offender mothers are perceived as being bad due to their involvement in criminality relative to mothers who are law-abiding, and further explains the representation cited by Stacy above. In addition, participants reported that drifting from the traditional behavioral role responsibility of raising their children led to the development of a bad mother identity. Stacy exemplified non-caring behavior which reflects on the idea of being a bad mother by saying "And then you take attention completely away from them and move it to something or somebody else because my children could have been dead and it would have been in my hands, that is a bad mother." Uthando, a 52-year-old single mother of one minor child and two adult children, added that: "They don't even give their children attention, you understand they don't give time to their children, they don't even bond with their children."

Women in conflict with the law were concerned about their children despite their perceptions of themselves as bad mothers or distant mothers. According to Celinska and Sigal (2010), the act of concern was a way for women to re-negotiate their ability to be good mothers to their children. The preceding statement, in conjunction with group identification in SIT, demonstrates that the offender mothers' evaluation of self as good or bad was relative to mothers who were not incarcerated (Haslam et al.,

2009). Despite having a good relationship with their children, women were concerned about their children's well-being. They wondered if their children were coping or if their children were safe. Uthando said that “. . . it is not easy, sometimes they speak on television about the condition of the male correctional facility, sometimes I stress about how my child will be like after he is released from the correctional facility.” Given that the nature of the incarceration context makes it difficult for women to care for their children behind bars, communicating with the child’s caregiver was the only way to ensure that the children were well cared for.

## **Discussion**

Similar to the literature (Artz & Hoffman-Wanderer, 2017; Baldwin, 2021; Birc et al., 2018; Lockwood, 2020; Mitchell & Davis, 2019), women in the study were from marginalized, poor communities characterized by the experience of violence, and limited employment opportunities. Like worldwide (Rodermond et al., 2016) and local research (Haffejee et al., 2006), this study pointed out that the maternal role obligation (care and protection) and the experience of physical abuse were connected to women’s pathways as opposed to financial constraints. Relating to the social construction paradigm idea of multiple realities (Koonin, 2019), the participants’ experiences of intimate partner violence (IPV) reflect the multiple realities that women in SA endure in their daily interactions with their partners. The high incidence of domestic violence and the unemployment rate that is affecting women in SA explained why the majority of the women in the study's criminal identities were shaped by the experience of victimization (Parry, 2018; Statistics South Africa [Stats SA], 2021). Further, this relates to Tajfel and Turner’s (1986) statement that indicates that the environment that a person occupies (the abusive environment) influences their multiple identities (maternal criminal behavior, and victim identification), which get evoked by different situations.

Similar to the literature (Nuytiens & Christiaens, 2016), the results of this study showed that women's obligation to adhere to the standards of intensive mothering placed them at risk of suffering abuse for the sake of either caring for or providing for their children through their partners, which contributed to their turning point in criminal behavior. The pressures of attaining the expectations of maintaining good mothering standards are conflicting with the reality of their condition, which is the high unemployment rate that exists in the South African context and is justified by women staying in prolonged abusive relationships (Mitchell & Davis, 2019; Stats SA, 2021). The above-mentioned findings of the study relate to SIT by pointing out the importance of the social environment, in this case, the context of abuse and impoverished home perpetuates women's identity as being an offender. It also resonates with the approach of social construction that perceives knowledge (of reacting aggressively in stressful situations) as being influenced by personal experience and interaction with family members.

Collaborating with literature (Garcia-Hallet, 2019; Hoskins & Cobbina, 2020; Kennedy et al., 2020), women’s entry into the correctional facility affected their

relationship with their children and identity as mothers to be strained due to minimal control and being partially involved in their children's life as co-distant mothers. The women reconstructed identity as distant co-mothers together with having partial involvement in their children's life, and mothering in a controlled environment provided an account of justification behind women's internalized feelings of frustrations, worry, and pain. In addition, the above statements relate to the social construction ideology of knowledge creation, which highlights that the subjective meaning of mothering either being good or bad is drawn from their experience of having to interact with other offenders within the context of the correctional facility through the use of culture and language (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In addition, the feeling of failure which emanates from being a distanced co-mother has also contributed to the construction of women identifying as bad mothers. The conception of a bad mother, which is grounded on physical absence in their children's lives, is a direct consequence of their conflicting behavior with the justice system. The above statement collaborates with group identification in SIT, which demonstrates that the offender mothers' evaluation of self as either being good or bad was relative to those mothers who were outside the correctional facility (Haslam et al., 2009).

Implications of how women identified themselves in a group of female offenders in the correctional institution and their desire to continue to carry out their role were noticed in the ability to maintain contact with their children. This finding addresses the gap in knowledge by showing the value of group identification in influencing self-actualization and self-confidence to perform tasks. Women's identification with a good mother identity enabled them to have a relationship with their children and continue to perform their role despite having challenges internal (fear, feelings of failure, and doubts) and external (telephone cost, environment of correctional facility, and traveling cost). Having self-esteem in their ability to be co-mothers with caregivers created chances of reunification with their children which was an unexpected finding that the study uncovered during a conversation about having contact with their children. Even though the hopes of reunification were positive, uncertainty revolved around women's identity and who they were going to be after being released from the correctional facility.

## **Limitation and Recommendation**

The findings of this study reflect my work as a master's student as well as the stories of selected participants during COVID-19 in one SA correctional facility. As a result of the specific time frame in which the research was conducted, they cannot make broad statements about the experiences of all offender mothers at various correctional facilities. The study's intention was not to generalize findings because it was a qualitative study designed to elicit in-depth accounts of the mothers' lived experiences inside a maximum-security facility, which is why this type of research was important. This study recommends that further research should be embarked on the experience of women negotiating their identities post-release.

## Conclusion

The study contributed to the existing knowledge of motherhood behind bars by emphasizing the importance of the environment in influencing how women experience and develop their identities as mothers. Beyond that, this study recognized the role of experiences (outside correctional facility) and current (behind bars) in shaping the way in which women reconstruct their identity to match the ideal intensive mothering ideology. It was worth noting that it has always been a struggle for women to achieve the dominant discourse of intensive mothering which was conceptualized in the Western context, due to different culture, realities, and experience. This is because the structures (community, correctional facility, and family) which are often dysfunctional provide little support which helps offenders strengthen their identity as women and as mothers.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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