

## Voices of immigrant women from prison

### *Voci di donne immigrate dal carcere*

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abstract

This paper investigates the conditions of immigrant women in Italian penitentiary institutions from a “militant” pedagogy perspective. The approach is centered on the rights and empowerment of people experiencing detention in order to explore how they combat stereotypes that generate exclusion, as well as to design educational settings accordingly. Supported by a variety of sources, favoring the autobiographical and narrative ones, the author attempts to bring light to foreign women’s experience of imprisonment, to what strategies and resources they implement to withstand prison life and how to identify educational pathways that stem from the values of a woman’s world.

**Key words:** prison, women, empowerment

*Il presente saggio indaga le condizioni delle donne immigrate negli Istituti penitenziari italiani da una prospettiva di pedagogia “militante”, assumendo un approccio centrato sui diritti e sulla responsabilizzazione dei soggetti che vivono un’esperienza di detenzione per contrastare gli stereotipi che generano esclusione e predisporre contesti educativi di empowerment. Attraverso una pluralità di fonti, privilegiando quelle autobiografico-narrative, si è tentato di mettere in luce come le donne straniere percepiscono il carcere, quali strategie e risorse mettono in campo per resistere, come sia possibile individuare percorsi trasformativi che partano proprio dai valori specifici del mondo femminile.*

**Parole chiave:** carcere, donne, empowerment

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## 1. Detained immigrant women as the scope of research

In a time of crisis of changed and changing scenarios characterized by multiculturalism and precarious prospects, where the danger of becoming a “risk-biography” (Beck, 2008) is increasingly higher, pedagogy should design educational settings devoted to empowerment, for facilitating the exercise of those rights that make the individual feel as an integral part of a community. If pedagogy, as a discipline, recovers its “militant” dimension (Tomarchio, Ulivieri, 2015), education becomes a transformational force to be deployed where the risk of exclusion and dehumanization is higher.

As a consequence, vulnerable individuals and perilous settings must be analyzed upon implementing programs aimed at fighting the process of “being less” (Zizioli, 2014): individuals such as immigrant women and places like prisons perfectly serve this purpose.

Over recent years, the author’s commitment has been intended to relay the concerns of the women in prison in order to conceive and design programs aimed at the recovery of their self-esteem as well as at strengthening their resilience skills, with education taking on a leading and challenging role.

The profile of detainees has changed in years and today it is more and more the expression of social weaknesses, precariousness and the absence of safeguards. This is due to society’s inability to provide supporting networks and programs for an actual economic-productive integration that would curb the incidence of offenses. This is especially true within the immigrant population, which is the target of die-hard prejudices, such as that of being more socially dangerous than the native population. Looking at statistics of criminal offenses committed, immigrants and in particular, women generally commit less offensive crimes against the individual and collective safety (Idos, 2016, pp. 177-183). The attitude of mistrust engendered by suspicion derive from what experts define prison-fare policy

(Anastasia, 2012), which sees detention as the most rapid and suitable solution to certain situations.

In Italy there are immigrant prisoners coming from almost every country of the world, with considerable peaks regarding Morocco (17%), Romania (15,6%), Albany (13,7%), Tunisia (11,1%), Nigeria (4,2%) ([www.giustizia.it](http://www.giustizia.it)). When it comes to women, the aforementioned social vulnerability acquires even more significant traits – especially with foreign women – and reveals scenarios that would deserve further investigation, which falls outside the scope of the present research. In brief: there are cases of exclusions and of marginalization that detention tends to aggravate since, unfortunately, prisons usually have a multiplier effect.

Detention might increase the number of risk factors that newly arrived foreign women have invariably experienced ‘outside’: such as denial of social rights; not speaking the language and not knowing the culture of the new country; absence of a skills necessary to avoid exploitation and discrimination. Immigrant women are then those more in need of help because they are often deprived of any form of assistance and family support (Scanu, 2013, pp. 71-79).

Upon being arrested, they are the ones most at a loss. Italy’s Regulation No 230 of 30 June 2000 provides that, “at intake”, during the first interview with either the prison director or a custodial staff member, every “new entry” must receive a leaflet (which is drafted in the most common languages: Arabic, English, Romanian, Spanish, German, Albanian, Bulgarian, Chinese, French, Croatian), detailing detainees and internees’ rights and obligations, listing the facilities and services they have access to, so that they can fully exercise their own rights and to ensure greatest awareness about prison’s rules. This practice is not always complied with, though. Furthermore, intercultural mediators are often missing, and they are supposed to support immigrant women while detained by helping them not just in learning the local language, but also promoting contacts with reference figures to avoid that their undoubtedly painful experience becomes even obscure.

It must be noted that women in prison are invisible, primarily because they are a minority: the Italian percentages do not deviate much from the European ones, ranging between 4% and 6% of the total population. According to latest statistics, updated to 31 December 2016, out of a prison population of 54.653, there are 2.285 women, and 858 of them are foreigners ([www.giustizia.it](http://www.giustizia.it)).

Their invisibility, due to the irrelevant percentage they represent, brought about a homogenization between women and men’s conditions of detention. Indeed, in Italy there are only 5 female detention centers, re-

sulting in most of women serving their sentence in units located within penitentiary institutions that were originally conceived and designed for men - despite Article 34 of the *European Prison Rules* (2006) invoked a sharp focus on women's physical, vocational, social and psychological needs, especially when considering that 90% of them are mothers.

The same is recommended on other international papers: both the *Women in Prison and Children of Imprisoned Mothers* report, drawn up by the Quaker United Nation Office in 2007 as well as the United Nations Bangkok Rules (<https://www.penalreform.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/PRI-Short-Guide-Bangkok-Rules-2013-Web-Final.pdf>) advocate for specific treatment for women prisoners, encouraging States to improve their conditions, with specific provisions in favor of mothers and foreign detainees.

The Italian legislation has acknowledged and safeguarded the right to maternity behind bars through different Acts (Article 11, paragraph 9, Law No 354, 26 July 1975 and Law No 62 of 21 April 2011 among others).

The mother/child bond resulted improved by: the allocation of more time for child-care; the provision of facilities, which are child-friendly in terms of psychological and physical development (i.e. nurseries); an effective support to parenting. It was decided to introduce new institutions to help the mother/child relationship both during criminal trial and while serving a sentence, that is the so called Minimum-Security Facilities for Mothers (*ICAM: Istituti a Custodia Attenuata per detenute Madri*), which are areas designed to meet the standards of a residential unit to protect the relationship between mother and child, as well as special residential facilities for imprisoned mothers with children aged 10 years or younger. However, none of these is as widespread as they should be.

In recent years, a big effort was made by different Associations to recognize female prisoners' specific needs and protecting parenting and children – to mention just a few: *A Roma, Insieme, Telefono azzurro, Bambinisenzasbarre* – not neglecting the significant contribution provided by the *EUROCHIPS (European Network for Children of Imprisoned Parents)*. They all answer the need of a widened welfare, where services design must be in partnership with representatives of the Third Sector.

Between 2013 and 2015, after the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg condemned Italy for its overcrowded and inhumane prisons, a series of reforms were undertaken in order to both reduce the number of detainees and improve the quality of life behind bars.

From summer 2015 till April 2016 the Ministry of Justice promoted the *General Conference on criminal sentences enforcement*, an important ini-

tiative to share prospects for change in a participatory way. This meant using a thoroughly novel approach that involved a variety of institutions, associations and professionals, each participating to the same working table as a stakeholder, with the objective of bringing about radical change. Indeed, the issue at stake is cultural rather than legislative ([www.giustizia.it](http://www.giustizia.it)) and, in brief, the focus must reverse the security drift by revamping local welfare policies.

The way imprisoned men and, consequently, women are treated is still designed for the Italian population, often featuring different characteristics from the actual population: denying individual differences and cultural diversity results in indifference to the histories and the single existences and, therefore, means ignoring the human being's needs and dignity.

Specifically, a range of relevant measures were taken mainly to support those "doubly vulnerable" individuals who are women and foreigners at the same time. It was decided to involve them in educational, recreational, sporting activities prepared for male inmates; furthermore, committees served by women detainees will be promoted, so as to boost co-management as a best practice.

There is hope for spreading alternative measures to detention, favoring diversion program for mothers, which immigrant women have had little access to due to a lack of an established residence. Specific health recommendations were provided so as to ensure physical and psychological well-being, reducing suffering and preventing the risk of self-harm or suicide attempts, which symbolize a desperate request for attention and are a form of protest against poor prison conditions.

It is also necessary to design visit rooms devoted to love and sexual relations, as well as to provide more chances of contact with the outside world for detainees – as long as they were not imposed any censorship on their external communications. So that they can use new technologies, free access to e-mail, internet and Skype, and whoever comes from abroad can keep in touch with their loved ones, with their left behind country, often fled nurturing the dream of a better future.

As far as training is concerned, vocational education should include any kind of activity, not just reinforce gender stereotypes, such as teaching women how to sew or to cook.

In light of these considerations, and with the purpose of favoring an emancipatory educational system, this research has tried to answer questions of undeniable educational urgency: how do foreign women experience prison? What are the resources they employ to survive? How could we implement transformative programs which stem from specific values of a woman's world?

## 2. Stories that disclose worlds

In order to find an answer to the above questions any practice that favors listening is valuable: so as to help sharing life experiences, understanding daily routines and offering the chance to set a new path. Listening to prisoners is a right that must be guaranteed. Within the scope of this paper, it is difficult to detail the profound value of all those initiatives that tried to *customize* the way to treat convicted women.

Among others, we can mention all the workshops on autobiography and creative writing, which were provided over recent years mainly for free by non-profit volunteers or trainers within the framework of specific curricular projects.

There is an entire world of people who, for different reasons, are regarded as allies by the prison staff: they introduce novelties to life in prison, thus reducing suffering and curbing insubordination. Indeed, abiding the rules is an unchanged feature in prison, in spite of the fact that nowadays empowerment is the new answer to free individuals from those perverse mechanisms that are common in a *total* institution like a prison, such as induced obedience that forces prisoners to always go through a “request form” whenever they want to voice their needs, often delayed by lengthy red tape.

Women join the activities but may have difficulties due to illiteracy, which is a common scourge for women in detention. This reveals a paradox: women who cannot exercise their right to education when this is free and guaranteed, could have this chance while in prison. Schooling is not just an integrated part of the “treatment program” – which has been regarded with increased interest as of late – but also proves that education can: play a transformative role along the rehabilitation pathway; activate the right strengths within the individual who is recreating and redefining his/her identity; pull one away from perverse mechanisms which tend to diminish one’s sense of responsibility. Detainees are not merely learning new notions, they are also building relationships, feeling emotions; those who are mothers feel closer to their children. In this way, everyone is given a chance for redemption, especially those who belong to those cultures, like the Roma women’s, that regard schooling as something alien to womanhood (Fiorucci, 2011) and that, incidentally, are the most represented ethnicity among prisoners.

It is no coincidence that associations like the *European Prison Education Association* ([www.epea.org](http://www.epea.org)) have renewed their commitment in promoting prisons as ‘learning arenas’ to redesign imprisoned men and, therefore, women’s rehabilitation, by widening the range of vocational training activities.

Furthermore, women come across as more serious-minded and steady in their learning approach. As evidence of that, one can just observe the positive results produced by business activities such as farms or tailor shops run by women, that deserve to be more supported and even multiplied.

Workshops on autobiography and creative writing are often crucial for the successful outcome of prisoners' rehabilitation pathway, since they give a chance to meditate on one's experiences and then to start looking at the world with different eyes. Indeed, narration has always been pivotal in unleashing one's emancipatory potential. This is not the appropriate forum to examine in depth how important it is to provide a detained individual with freedom of imagination, which is nurtured by reading and writing and, therefore, to offer a chance of "escapism" and cultural rehabilitation, a valuable help when an individual is redesigning her life (Benelli, 2010; Di Roberto, 2013). The above mentioned workshops represent an educational key element as they promote:

- empowerment – thus combating hetero-directional and depersonalizing attitudes;
- building-up self-care and self-esteem;
- a form of deep empathy – by creating a sense of community in a setting where marginalization and exclusion are extreme and ethnicity-based.

Narrating helps overcoming fears and fighting stereotypes and prejudices since, despite differences and difficulties, everyone involved makes an effort to share their personal story, to get to know others' traditions, to create bonds.

[...] the writing workshop we took in the library made us closer and now we are really starting to get fun: we dangle our cigarettes through the blue bars over the Nigerians sitting among themselves on the benches during their open-air hour, the Chinese on the lawn, the Romani beneath the wattle-made canopy, the Romanians walking in circles among flickering Italians playing volleyball, the Russians painting their nails, the Senegalese braiding hair extensions [...]. (Sarsini, 2014, p. 57).

Prisoners tend to keep up their ethnical identity and to group together with individuals of their same nationality: it is a way to feel stronger, to regain a part of oneself that seems lost, a manner to assert one's story and, consequently, one's identity.

By means of narrating, and narrating one's story, even the most rotten and confined cell becomes "a room of one's own" (Woolf, 2016), to cherish humanity, to overcome together one of the harshest challenges: being isolated from the rest of the world and progressively losing the affection of the beloved, one's habits and even oneself.

Women's narrations reveal a varied population that can live detention in a creative way, expressing a need for grouping together and socializing that is much stronger than men's. Certain ethnic groups, such as Roma women, seem to better adjust to the system, constantly honing their art of survival. Most of them are young and excel when it comes to simple self-care rituals, which behind bars become crucial to remind one she is still a woman. They can make do with the few things they are allowed to keep in detention and they give time a specific value: they live in the present, with no regret for the past or anxiety for the future. This means they can indulge in cheerful activities, such as dancing, so as to recover their lost carefreeness through music.

They all have this desire of "not losing themselves": they seem to be fighting more against the possibility of losing their identity than their freedom (Sarsini, 2011; 2013; Cristofaro, Zizioli, 2014). This universe is full of differences which not even detention can delete (Campelli, Faccioli, Giordano, Pitch, 1992).

These women had expectations which were disappointed by migration, regardless of their ethnicity and nationality: fate was supposed to be different from getting restrained in a setting of marginalization, where every hope seems to be lost. They are all "girls", leaving aside age, because detention nullifies not just one's personality, but also the generation gap: cellmates become cell-buddies, school has a "releasing" effect; they forge a new jargon, opposed to common prison slang which depersonalizes and "dehumanizes". In prison, a sort of sixth continent, language becomes a territory with no borders and the attempt to go beyond linguistic stereotypes helps avoiding narrow mindedness. Detainees deconstruct lexicon to bring light to inconsistencies and contradictions (Cristofaro, Zizioli, 2014).

Shared memories belong to the life spent in the country of origin, and to its specific pace, habits, but also its perfumes, odors, everyday life anecdotes, and especially to the memory of moments of intimacy; in detention, one does not only suffer because of conviction but also due to being forced to leave behind the beloved ones.

In the relationship with their children, many detained mothers find the right energy for rebuilding themselves and recovering "the good" they still have inside; a positive feeling that lives with guilt and that, if not duly re-

inforced, where not duly reinforced, might be at risk of remaining ‘imprisoned’ in a setting where a disempowering regression is favored.

Identity related anxiety produce a sense of inadequacy and emotional distress which impacts on one’s role as a mother: many detainees regard themselves as “imperfect mothers” (Ronconi, Zuffa, 2014, p. 258), and such awareness often makes their detention even harder.

This sense of inadequacy is less suffered by the Roma women who keep a lighthearted relationship with their children and do not seem to be affected by detention, except when parting; nonetheless, the presence of an extended family can sooth suffering and offer safety for the child’s future. Then there are all the others: the South American, the Chinese and the Romanian, each one with their own traditions. Cultural differences are a burden, especially when a prisoner’s cellmates speak languages, have traditions and habits which are completely different to hers. Quoting a Bulgarian woman detained in the women’s section of the Rebibbia prison: “I have never been so desperate in my whole life. It feels as if I had no more reasons to go ahead. I do not feel loved, I feel powerless, isolated in a place with people of so many nationalities where everyone speaks their own language [...]” (Cristofaro, Zizioli, 2014, p. 138).

In order to acknowledge diversity, and to give value to it, one has to enjoy the little things, like sharing meals.

There is a diverse approach to detention, too and a diverse way to deal with the female staff (educators and prison officers). It is a complex setting that hardly ever creates solidarity, even when both inmates and staff are women, since correctional roles typically imply control. At the same time, a wide range of good practices can still be mentioned as well as successful experiences; a number of women admit they were able to hold on thanks to the support received by staff.

Only second to maternity, sex lies within the thorniest issues behind bars: to be “desired, imagined, written and spoken of, self-managed, bragged about, homosexual, rigged up, programmed, extorted, taught” (Sarsini, 2014, p. 47) and that, as delicate, intimate and personal as this dimension can be, entails habits, traditions, life styles and ways of thinking that in prison intensify reactions and highly influence behaviours.

In order to protect the rights to equality and diversity, notions like *encounter*, *reciprocity*, *cooperation* and *solidarity* must be preferred.

In such a varied universe shared by story-telling, where being a woman has multiple nuances, but suffering risks to be its only dimension, both weakness and strength, sadness and carefreeness coexist; what is more important, resistance strategies are revealed, as all the studies listed in the bibliography confirm.

There are many areas for intervention, since it is never easy to translate measures into practice. The *General Conference* expressed its intention in this respect, but there is still a long way to go to humanize detention and to prevent that a woman in contact with this dimension has no other option but endure marginalization and inferiority.

### 3. Listening as a tool for change: an approach

Indeed, revealing a submerged universe is not enough. Giving a voice to women in prison – who nowadays symbolize a multicultural society which is unable to protect its most vulnerable individuals – means letting them actively join the renovation pathway.

From a pedagogical point of view, the most rewarding approach is restituting women their individuality and their rights from a gender based stance while directly involving them in the process (Zuffa, 2015). An approach that resonates in the international legislation leveraging dignities and rights, which goes beyond the ideology of rehabilitation which, despite seeming innovative when first put forward, has often endorsed a correctional ideology (Gonnella, 2014).

In summary, the so much advocated for prison metamorphosis, from a *total* to a *social* institution, from a medical-therapeutic paradigm to one of social reintegration and self-empowerment, seems to work better when it comes to women.

It was exactly to meet women's needs that alternative institutions were designed, such as ICAMs and special residential facilities. It is possible to effectively bring about change in detention centers by giving more power to women, their ideas and their feelings; this helps breaking a stereotype of weakness and vulnerability even when these women's conditions hint at uncertain prospects, precariousness and marginalization.

Is this utopian?

It is indeed necessary to call for an alternative model of femininity which gives women their dignity back, makes them architects of their own fate and capable of exercising their own rights. To this end, it would be desirable to keep in mind the suggestion of exploring one's deepest world, to awake and fight, as indicated by the ethno-clinical psychologist Pinkola Estés, who back in the early Sixties gave courses of creative writing in Colorado and California prisons, in order to motivate every woman to awaken her own vital force and her instinctual nature as a *Wild Woman* (Pinkola Estés, 1992). Such a model offers valuable suggestions, especially to keep women safe from the delusion of a "saving Prince" and, therefore, from

the grips of a sense of inferiority which is often responsible for their misfortune. To this purpose, one should look into the types of offenses committed by immigrant women: they usually are misdemeanors, due to poor economic and social conditions, but also to a male presence who misleads their actions.

As suggested by Martha Nussbaum (2002, p. 9) an approach investing in persons' capabilities should be privileged: pondering what their skills are, whether their human dignity is duly acknowledged and respected and how free they are when choosing their own fate in such harsh conditions. This is an approach that Nussbaum herself defined as "a feminist approach" (Nussbaum, 2002, pp. 56-57) and that she has implemented because it helps tackling the specific theoretical and practical problems that women invariably face.

In summary, the action of transforming prisons in places open to the community, where to forge relations "aimed at favoring self-education" (Ronconi, Zuffa p. 271), should be started and promoted by the prison management operating within female sections, which are currently the symbol of extreme gender based inferiority. The hope is to make progress from a gender aware stand, through a "participatory model" that must involve the fundamental contribution of pedagogical expertise.

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