



## The buried alive: forgotten women in Italian penitentiary institutions Le sepolte vive: donne dimenticate negli istituti penitenziari italiani

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### ABSTRACT

The story of women in prison has always been an interesting topic to explore.

In this contribution we intend to highlight the theme of the marginalization of women detained in Italian penitentiary institutions: isolated, forgotten women and – as in the case of the high security section of the prison in Messina – *buried alive*.

Our reflection intends to take a snapshot of the current situation of female detention and to hypothesize ways of development, of emancipation so that we can no longer forget anyone and none and, at the same time, offer to prison staff and civil society, opportunities for reflection on the condition of imprisonment, in particular that of women.

#### KEYWORDS

**Women, prison, without-voice, emancipation, community.  
Donne, carcere, senza-voce, emancipazione, comunità.**

La storia delle donne in carcere è da sempre un tema interessante da approfondire.

In questo contributo intendiamo mettere in luce il tema dell'emarginazione delle donne detenute negli Istituti penitenziari italiani: donne isolate, dimenticate e – come nel caso della sezione di alta sicurezza del carcere di Messina – *sepolte vive*.

La nostra riflessione intende fare una fotografia sulla condizione attuale della detenzione femminile e ipotizzare vie di sviluppo, di emancipazione per non permettere più di dimenticare nessuno e nessuna e, allo stesso tempo, offrire al personale penitenziario e alla società civile, occasioni di riflessione sulla condizione detentiva, in particolare quella femminile.

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## 1. The female dimension within Italian penitentiary institutions<sup>1</sup>

When people speak about prisons, they often do so in a generalist manner without giving too much attention to the fact that each Prison Institute, although with rules common to others as part of national superstructures and addressed by international guidelines, is a complex organism with its own internal rules, processes, human and social resources. However, it is as if each correctional institution is its own “problem”. Within this framework, it therefore becomes even more complex to address the issue of the female dimension within prison settings. Currently, out of a total of 61.133 restricted people, 2,682 (4.38 %) are female, and of these, 21 have dependent children within penitentiary institutions (Ministry of Justice, 2024). Given such a residual number, not all penitentiary institutions accommodate women. Those designated exclusively for women are four (C.R. Trani, C.C. Pozzuoli, C.C. Germana Stefanini Rome, C.R. Venezia Giudecca). The remaining women are placed in 52 isolated wards within male penitentiary institutions (Ministry of Justice).

Despite the extensive collection of principles and guidelines, standards and norms, developed by the United Nations over the course of more than 50 years there is still a lack of methodological references and practical tools to remedy the heterogeneous discriminatory practices experienced by restricted women during their stay in penitentiary institutions. Part of the extensive collection are the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders, also known as the “Bangkok Rules”. In fact, given their small numbers compared to the total restricted population, female inmates remain subject to less educational (schooling, work, cultural) and suffer total disregard for what concerns their “day-to-day” life.

Speaking of women’s detention, the reflections of Palmisano (2015) are very important. Palmisano points out that equal treatment of people in unequal situations will help perpetuate injustice and not eradicate it. Hence the need to carefully rethink women’s detention by paying more attention to their specific needs and trying to create learning devices capable of supporting the achievement of the identified needs (Penal Reform International, 2019).

In this regard, the Department of Penitentiary Administration in its Circular No. 0308268 of Sept. 17, 2008, contributed to structuring a specific regulation of women’s penal execution, with special attention to the affective dimension (arts. 19 and 20), specific health needs (arts. 16, 23 and 25), the different relationship with the needs of one’s physicality (arts. 9, 10, 16 and 24), and the need to provide equal opportunities for social reintegration (arts. 30 and 33).

### 1.1 Educational offerings for women recluses

Despite the fact that current legislation emphasizes the importance of setting individualized educational plans, the problem of mis-match between educational needs and offerings within prison settings has been evident and persistent for years now (Basilisco, 2016; Pampaloni, 2023) due to various contextual elements: the high number of the restricted population; population turnover does not help to identify real needs; people’s needs are constantly changing depending on intra- and extra-mural events; and the human and economic resources that the prison administration possesses are insufficient. To this issue, speaking of women’s detention, must be added the issue of gender stereotyping whereby the activities proposed to them are aimed at recovering the values of care, family and adherence to an already predetermined social-cultural role (Antigone, 2023; Castaldo, 2023; Zuffa, 2015; Zizioli, 2021; A Ryder, 2020; Barberet, 2014; Decker, Spohn, Ortiz, Hedberg, 2010). In order to have the most up-to-date picture regarding educational offers for women inmates, the table below was prepared from information obtained from the Ministry of Justice website and Antigone’s first Report on women inmates in Italy entitled “On the Women’s Side” (2023).

1 Paragraph edited by Marta Pampaloni

Penitentiary Institutions	n. restricted people	Educational Course	Work	Work-related projects	Cultural and sports activities
C.R. Trani	40	Middle school course: 10 women attending University courses: 2 women attending	Prison administration employment: 22 women involved Employment for outside employer: 2 women involved	Making bags from recycled materials (by Coop. Officina Creativa)	/
C.C. Pozzuoli	98	Literacy course (Levels I and II) & University course: 34 women attending in total Professional beautician course: 2 women attending	Prison administration employment: 14 women involved Employment for outside employer: 17 women involved (3 work outside the institution and 14 work inside: 3 in agricultural holding, 9 in tailoring, and 2 in roasting)	“Cajola” tailoring project Coffee roasting (by Coop. Lazzarelle)	Writing and reading course
C.C. Germana Stefani (Roma)	355	School courses of: catering institute; art high school & university courses: 15 women attending in total.	Prison administration employment: 14 women involved Employment for outside employer: 17 women involved	Sewing Workshop (by Coop. Soc. Men at Work)	Theater
				Gardening	Soccer
				Regeneration of electronic equipment (by Linkem company)	Screenwriting course
C.R. Venezia Giudecca	91	Literacy course: 7 women attending First level course: 7 women attending English course: 9 women attending Computer course: 7 women attending	Prison administration employment: 27 women involved Employment for outside employer: 17 women involved	Tailoring workshop (by Coop. Il Cerchio) - 3 restricted hired	“Women’s Course” (Ass. The Mustard Seed) - 3 women involved. Theater workshop (ass. Balamòs Teatro)- 3 women involved
				Cosmetics workshop (by Coop. Rio Terà dei Pensieri) - 1 restricted involved	Skillful Hands workshop (ass. The Mustard Seed)- 19 women involved
				Vegetable garden (by Coop. Rio Terà dei Pensieri) - 3 women involved	Reading workshop (ass. Closer) - 6 women involved
				Laundry	Waldorf dolls course (by Olivotti cooperative) - 4 women involved.

Table 1: The educational offerings of major correctional institutions for female restricted.

## 2. The *buried alive*. Women high-security restricted in Messina prison<sup>2</sup>

Women, therefore, currently account for 4.38% of the total number of restricted persons, thus shaping themselves as a marginal population within a predominantly male world. They are inmates locked up in Italian prisons: women who are in danger of becoming invisible, of being forgotten. There is a lack of gynecologists, few spaces available, fewer opportunities.

Without forgetting the drama of children imprisoned with their mothers. Imprisonment has always been thought of as masculine and applied to women who, precisely because of their small numbers, are in danger of being forgotten for the penal system. There are not many women in prison, with all the difficulties this entails. There are only four women’s penal institutions in the country: in Trani, Pozzuoli, Rebibbia and Venezia-Giudecca.

In Genova-Pontedecimo prison, male restricted can use a gym, a space precluded to women. For men, are social rooms provided on each floor? In the women’s sections, sociability is done in the corridor, and the whole thing permeated by an old social concept that limits women’s activities to old stereotypes: if male prisoners can

2 Paragraph edited by Caterina Benelli.

participate in computer and typography programs, female prisoners can only work in the kitchen and tailoring. With obvious repercussions in terms of social reintegration.

While acknowledging the efforts of the prison administration, thus, the Guarantor of the detainees calls for a new approach that recognizes gender differences, introducing a specificity of female versus male detention for the simple reason that the same treatment for women and men does not produce equitable results. It was the pronouncement of the European Court in Strasbourg in January 2013 that found the treatment given to women in the Italian prison system to be “inhuman and degrading.”

Since 2001 I have been designing and coordinating educational projects in prisons at the national level, but in recent years I have had the opportunity to collaborate with penitentiary institutes in Messina area with projects of great importance and for me, highly formative. In this contribution, I refer to the 2017-2028 experience with women in high security at the Gazzi Institute in Messina: these are women with crimes related to the mafia organization (for more details, look in: Lo Verso, 1998, 2003). The Mafia is a secret society that by definition excludes women. Secrecy marks the insurmountable boundary between those who remain outside and those who are inside: and women are outside. The Mafia not only excludes women, but also carries out an iron control over the private sphere, the quintessential feminine place. Belonging is a mafia sphere. In the Mafia ideology, women are to be dominated, used, kept in the dark: a paternalistic model where women play the role of defending the family and male reputation for the sake of a successful Mafia career (Siebert, 1994, p. 79). And it is in subordination that women's role is inevitably charged with complicity, dependence and, at the same time, participation and responsibility.

Thus, behaviors and attitudes are activated in women embedded in mafia families that do not involve thinking, the ability to think for themselves. A role, that of mafia women, that oscillates between extraneousness and complicity, between subordination and submission and the more or less conscious perception of their important role in the system. This is expressed through actions of financial transactions, “prestanome” without, at times, being aware of the extent of the action itself.

From research carried out by the University of Palermo on a group of Mafia women who were struggling with the affairs of their husbands and their absence and who therefore turned to services. A number of issues emerge from the data of the services themselves that would need further space for reflection, but which here - for reasons of space - will only be mentioned.

In the case of women embedded in mafia contexts, we can assert that in the absence of the husband, the role of the strong institution of the family comes into greater crisis due to the death or imprisonment of the husband himself; thus, rather obvious depressive or anxious states emerge that challenge the idealization of the partner. The condition of women's dependence on the system and on the man (husband, in particular, but also siblings or other family members) becomes explicit and emerges precisely in these moments.

After a study of the mafia system, I approached the Messina prison and, in this case, the high-security section. I had never been to the prison in Messina and had never had the opportunity to collaborate with the institute in question, but I welcomed a request derived from a need in the institute: to make educational proposals with women in high security who have no access to any educational or cultural path. A project for people left alone, forgotten in prison: a marginalization in the marginality of the Prison Institute itself.

We know that the Italian Constitution and the Penitentiary Ordinance itself imposes individual and group treatment interventions of various kinds with the entire inmate population and therefore, we were within a real lack and, after negotiating with the Management the education course to be activated in the high-security women's section, I ask to meet the women who will participate in it to get to know them before starting the journey together. We had to look at each other, see each other, get a feel for each other.

I met the high-security women in 2017 in the outside area of the prison used for strolling during air time. I expected to meet girls or young women, in fact the group was mixed but homogeneous in crime type with ages ranging from 22 to 70 years old. They are women imprisoned for Mafia and Andrangheta crimes linked to Sicilian and Calabrian underworld families.

When we met, I introduced myself and pointed out that I have always collaborated with penitentiary institutions in the Tuscan territory and other national areas and that I had the pleasure of also getting to know the penitentiary reality of Messina in order to propose to them a educational path to be defined together, which could be useful and respect their real needs.

Contrary to how it always happened to me the suspicion, the fear of telling even the slightest personal thing, played an important role in the path directing me to revisit the project hypothesized and recalibrated, therefore, on the needs of that particular type of women. An important part of the difficulty in expressing themselves, in sharing and relating to the group and to me, was certainly played by the low language and literacy skills of the participants: a condition that led me to revise the path previously shared with the Management by reshaping it to the needs and characteristics of the group. Some of the women, in fact, were illiterate and others illiterate back in their formative histories struck me very much, and for this reason, at the end of the experience made together, I oriented the section's treatment work on the school route.

However, the initial meeting with the women, in the garden of the Institute was enlightening and stimulating and induced me to set aside my certainties given by an important and nationally distributed experience, and then review, break down the educational proposal and recompose it together with the group of women with whom I spent a year.

The initial objective of proposing an autobiographical workshop, already experimented in more than 20 years of work in prison and modeled within various publications (in particular: Benelli, 2008; 2012), was revisited by taking a step back from my ideas and welcoming theirs: first and foremost, the need to be there, to speak their thoughts and to come out of silence and passivity. The course turned toward an autobiographical storytelling project that was completed in early 2018.

The title of the contribution borrows the words of female restricted who, in recounting their own incarceration story inside the high-security section of the prison, described themselves as: *Buried alive*. A weighty statement that took time and a way to go through it, understand it, and comprehend the atmosphere and condition of being a woman prisoner in high-security sections without being seen, paid attention to, and without opportunities for growth, reflection, and improvement.

For this reason, the project rethought for the year 2018-19 at the proposal of the management, considered promoting a psycho-educational intervention – again with this small group of women – to provide them with an additional opportunity to continue through a path of developing the participants' skills and resources for the prevention of distress and the promotion of well-being, including in situations of detention and maximum security.

It will be the women restricted themselves who will contribute to the redesign by – finally – giving voice to their needs to get out of the condition of “buried alive”: to continue to tell experiences and confront each other, to have a say; to have a space for support and accompaniment at the end of the sentence; to do activities including manual, creative but always continuing to know each other better.

These evaluations were discussed at length and allowed them to define, together, in a participatory way, a new hypothesis of intervention where they themselves, for the first time, were questioned and made protagonists of their educational and treatment plan. It is not easy to find a condition in prison where restricted people can have a space for co-design and to reason together about what might be useful for them. In part, this has happened by helping to bring them out of the condition of invisible, forgotten women buried alive. At the end of the ten meetings, given the level of low literacy and lack of access to schooling, it was necessary on my part to initiate with the Director of the prison the design of literacy schooling paths for women who had not had such a chance due to numerical problems but who had the right and we had the duty to offer to all, not one less, the opportunity to emancipate themselves, to know themselves, to reflect critically, to have a voice by bringing forward their ideas. A challenge, that of emancipation in prison (Benelli, 2012) in this case for women forgotten, left alone, without educational opportunities: a condition that reinforces the value mechanisms that had led them to participate in crimes of mafia associations (Lo Verso, 1998, 2003).

### 3. Potential developments<sup>3</sup>

From what has been explicated so far, it appears necessary to continue researching and working on possible experiments to be put in place regarding women's detention. One of the cornerstones of change to strive for is education (Benelli, 2012, 2024; Zizioli, 2021; Pampaloni, 2023; Antigone, 2023).

The issue of formal and nonformal education in prison is a central theme and an institutional and civic duty that in some contexts, as indicated in the previous paragraph, is still not fully carried out. We know how much the value of our society is also measured by care for the last, for the marginalized, by processes of inclusion and empowerment of fragile communities. If this does not happen, then we still cannot speak of progress and civilization of our society.

In addition to working in the direction of providing all and every prisoner with educational opportunities for his or her own emancipation and life planning inside and outside the walls, we believe that a necessary road ahead is the training of prison staff so that together and on an interdisciplinary level, we can share a philosophy of prison environments as learning environments and not just control and punishment.

Antigone's Report (2023) mentions the need to invest in the training of Prison Administration's personnel, with different roles and functions, on specific issues related to gender needs and the rights of restricted women.

Recognizing in particular the extent of the prison officer's influence on the attitude, behavior and educational process of female inmates requires greater investment in innovative training of the prison police officers, both in the topics covered, which are more psycho-pedagogical in nature in the adult field, and in the methods of delivery.

3 Paragraph edited by Marta Pampaloni and Caterina Benelli



This would lead to added value within the entire prison system. Prison officers are the ones who probably have the greatest influence on the female inmates given their constant rapport. For this reason, the main goal to strive for is to improve the knowledge, skills and attitudes of officers in order to contribute to the improvement of professional behaviors, not only of a securitarian order, so that they can be, for the restricted ones, a positive reference point in their growth process.

Complementary to having highly qualified personnel, Antigone (2023) suggests that an ad hoc office be established in the Department of Prison Administration to deal with women's detention and that it should be headed by gender policy experts.

A further axis of change to strive for is inherent in expanding collaborations with territorial networks to offer broad and heterogeneous educational opportunities to the restricted population as the prison alone is unable to respond to the tasks it has been asked to perform (Karthaus, Block, Hu, 2019).

The importance, in fact, of maintaining the relationship between inside and outside the penitentiary context, which is functional to the (re)educational process of restricted people but at the same time also to the performance of penitentiary institutions per se, has been reaffirmed over and over again at the national and international level by programmatic texts and regulations (Council of Europe, 1990, 2006; EPEA, 2015; L.354/1975; UNESCO, 2015, 2021). The consolidation and expansion of the territorial network and in particular with the world of Associations and the Third Sector could lead to the implementation and why not, systematization of targeted interventions.

Without the collaboration of the network of the entire local community, an institution like the prison cannot work alone for that process of re-education and training for all the people who inhabit it. Involving the local area, civil society and associations to create bridges, networks and links becomes a possible way and a necessity that requires collaborative work, networking and the creation of roads and paths to be designed together, including with the restricted population itself.

Interesting on the women's detention side to identify nationwide realities that deal with women's gender empowerment such as Women 4.0 and to understand how it can collaborate with Department of Prison Administration and consequently individual penitentiary institutions. The Women 4.0 Association aims to increase and strengthen representation and qualified female employment to achieve equal rights and space in the labor market and society by making women protagonists in addressing new global challenges. The cornerstones on which the association works are training, aimed at breaking down cultural and social prejudices and stereotypes that prevent women from accessing professional training paths by supporting female leadership processes, and solidarity, supporting women's concrete causes to accelerate the closing of the gender gap. Given the Association's relevance at the national level even in the policy arena, it would be interesting to co-design micro-experiments of analyzing the educational and training needs of the restricted, which go far beyond child-related needs, and which are often disregarded, and to hypothesize ad hoc actions.

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