

Custodial Shadows: Lived Experiences of Postpartum Mothers Deprived of Liberty

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ABSTRACT

Postpartum care is critical for women, particularly for those who are incarcerated, as they navigate both physical recovery and the unique challenges of their circumstances. Access to adequate healthcare within correctional systems remains severely limited, impacting the well-being of these women. While existing research has examined various prison-based programs—such as parenting classes, prison nurseries, and health initiatives—the voices and experiences of Postpartum Mothers Deprived of Liberty (PMDL) raising infants while imprisoned are often overlooked. This study aims to illuminate these experiences and how the prison environment influences their roles as mothers. Employing a descriptive phenomenological approach, this research involved a comprehensive literature review and purposive sampling to gather a targeted research sample. Specific criteria were established to identify eligible primary data sources. Data collection primarily utilized semi-structured interviews, allowing for open dialogue that facilitated a deep exploration of the informants' thoughts, beliefs, and experiences. Data analysis followed Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method, ensuring credibility and trustworthiness through triangulation techniques, including audio recordings, field notes, pilot testing, and consultations with a research expert and psychometrician. Member checking was also conducted to verify the accuracy of the findings based on the informants' experiences. The analysis revealed five key themes: "Accepting the Inevitable: The Problems Arise After Birth," "Amusement Amidst Dilemma," "Supporting the Unsung: Building Bridges for Mothers Behind Bars," "Resilient Solitude: Embracing Inner Peace Amidst Maternal Separation," and "Maternal Bonds in Confinement: Underdeveloped Maternal Identity." The study concludes that while PMDLs engage in livelihood initiatives, skill development, and support networks, their separation from their infants significantly hampers their ability to fulfill maternal obligations and undermines their identity as mothers.

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Introduction

The postpartum period is a crucial phase in maternal care, marked by rapid physical, emotional, and psychological adjustments. During this time, mothers undergo significant changes while recovering from childbirth and adapting to the responsibilities of caring for a newborn [1]. This period is often fraught with challenges such as postpartum depression, relationship violence, urinary incontinence, and the risk of postpartum hemorrhage, making timely and adequate healthcare essential for recovery [2]. For incarcerated mothers, these challenges are compounded by the constraints of the prison system, which limits access to comprehensive maternal care and support.

Pregnancy and childbirth, already demanding under normal circumstances, become even more distressing for imprisoned women. The restrictive and often inadequate prison environment can exacerbate health risks during pregnancy and postpartum, leaving many imprisoned mothers without the care they need [3]. Imprisoned pregnant women are regarded as an especially vulnerable and disadvantaged population due to their limited access to healthcare, poor living conditions, and the emotional toll of separation from family and society [4]. These factors significantly hinder their ability to meet their health needs during

pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period, leading to worsened outcomes for both mothers and their newborns.

Globally, the incarceration of women has risen sharply. Since 2000, the number of women in prison has increased by 60%, with a global annual growth rate of 6.9% [5]. In the Philippines, women make up approximately 11% of the prison population, with 0.45% of these women being pregnant at the time of their incarceration [6]. This growing demographic of imprisoned women underscores the urgent need to address the specific healthcare needs of this group, especially during the postpartum period, when both maternal and infant health are most vulnerable.

International human rights frameworks have recognized the need for specific protections for incarcerated pregnant and postpartum women. The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, also known as the Nelson Mandela Rules, adopted in 2015, call for the protection and advancement of the health rights of pregnant and lactating women in prison. Additionally, the Bangkok Rules on Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders emphasize the special needs of women deprived of liberty (PDL), particularly those who are pregnant or postpartum, highlighting the importance of providing access to appropriate care and ensuring that their rights are upheld [6]. These international guidelines stress that incarcerated women, especially those who are pregnant or have recently given birth, require specialized care and attention to safeguard their health

and the health of their infants.

Despite these global mandates, there is limited research on the lived experiences of postpartum mothers deprived of liberty (PMDL), particularly in the Philippine context. While some studies have explored prison-based interventions like parenting programs, nurseries, and healthcare initiatives, few have delved into the personal narratives of postpartum mothers in prison, especially how they navigate the emotional, physical, and psychological challenges of motherhood behind bars.

This study seeks to bridge this gap by exploring the lived experiences of postpartum mothers in Philippine prisons. Specifically, it aims to understand the multifaceted challenges these mothers face, including their emotional well-being, physical recovery, and the care of their infants within a carceral setting. By examining the experiences of PMDL, this study also seeks to provide valuable insights for healthcare providers and policymakers. The goal is to inform the development of more individualized, compassionate, and comprehensive postpartum care plans for incarcerated mothers, ensuring that their unique needs are met during this critical period. Furthermore, the study will also explore the long-term effects of postpartum incarceration on both mothers and their children, as well as the potential policy reforms needed to improve their healthcare outcomes.

Through a deeper understanding of these experiences, this research aims to contribute to the improvement of maternal and infant health for incarcerated mothers in the Philippines, with the hope of advocating for stronger policies and practices that uphold the dignity and well-being of these women and their children.

Methods

Research Design

This study utilized a descriptive phenomenological research design, combined with an extensive review of existing literature on postpartum experiences of mothers in correctional settings. Phenomenology, specifically the descriptive approach, aims to explore and describe lived experiences as they are perceived by individuals, without imposing any theoretical interpretations or assumptions [7]. This design was chosen as it aligns with the study's goal to uncover the authentic lived experiences of Postpartum Mothers Deprived of Liberty (PMDLs) in the Philippines, focusing on their challenges, coping strategies, and maternal roles while incarcerated.

Phenomenological research emphasizes the subjective experiences of individuals and seeks to uncover the underlying essence of these experiences. By allowing PMDLs to share their experiences, this approach helped capture the complexities of motherhood within a prison setting. It also allowed for an exploration of the tension between motherhood and imprisonment, providing a space to highlight emotional, psychological, and physical dimensions of the PMDLs' postpartum experiences.

The literatures supported the phenomenological findings, offering a contextual framework for understanding the broader implications of the PMDLs' experiences. By comparing the lived experiences of these mothers to existing knowledge on motherhood, postpartum health, and the prison environment, the research could situate their unique narratives within a broader discourse on maternal health and human rights in correctional institutions.

Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study employed purposive sampling, a non-random sampling technique widely used in qualitative research to select individuals who have specific characteristics or knowledge relevant to the study's objectives [8]. In this case, purposive sampling was used to identify postpartum mothers who were incarcerated at the time of their child's birth and who continued to care for their newborns in prison. The rationale behind this sampling method was to gather data from individuals who could provide rich, in-depth insights into their specific experiences as PMDLs.

The inclusion criteria were as follows

- **Postpartum Status:** The participants must have given birth while serving their sentence in prison.
- **Newborn Care:** The participants must have lived with and taken care of their newborn within the prison environment after delivery.
- **Communication Ability:** The participants must have been able to communicate their experiences in a coherent and reflective manner, ensuring that the data gathered was comprehensive and meaningful.

Participants were identified in collaboration with the prison administration and the health staff working within the facility. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, the confidentiality of personal information, and the voluntary nature of participation were strictly upheld. Each potential participant was briefed on the study's objectives, their rights as participants, and the measures taken to protect their anonymity.

The principle of data saturation guided the final sample size. Data saturation is a concept in qualitative research where the collection of new data no longer provides additional insights or themes to the phenomenon being studied [8]. In this research, saturation was achieved after conducting six interviews, with the seventh interview serving as a confirmation that no new themes emerged. The decision to stop at seven participants ensured that the study had enough depth to explore the experiences of PMDLs while respecting the constraints of time and feasibility within the prison environment.

The final sample consisted of seven PMDLs, whose demographic profiles are outlined in Table 1. The mothers ranged in age, length of incarceration, number of children, and duration of postpartum status, providing a diverse set of experiences. This variety allowed for a broader understanding of how imprisonment impacted maternal health and child care in different stages of motherhood.

Instrument and Data Gathering Procedure

The primary data collection tool was semi-structured interviews, which are highly effective in qualitative research for eliciting detailed personal narratives while maintaining enough flexibility for participants to express themselves freely. This approach allowed the researchers to guide the discussion with pre-determined questions while also allowing participants to steer the conversation toward topics that were personally significant to them [9].

The interview guide contained open-ended questions that focused on key areas of interest such as

- The emotional and psychological experience of being pregnant and postpartum in a prison environment.
- The availability and quality of healthcare services for postpartum mothers in the facility.
- Challenges faced in caring for a newborn while in prison,

including access to basic needs, breastfeeding, and child development.

- Coping mechanisms and support systems, including relationships with other inmates, staff, and family outside the prison.
- Hopes and concerns for the future, both for themselves and their children.

These questions were designed to allow participants to narrate their experiences in their own words, offering rich, personal insights that quantitative methods might not capture.

The interviews were conducted in person within private rooms in the prison facility to ensure that participants felt secure and comfortable in sharing sensitive details about their experiences. Privacy was prioritized to reduce the influence of external factors (such as prison staff or other inmates) that could affect the candor of responses [10]. Ensuring a private space for interviews also aligned with ethical best practices in qualitative research, fostering an environment where participants could speak freely about their experiences without fear of repercussions or judgment.

The average length of the interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes, depending on the participants' willingness to elaborate on their stories. Each interview was audio-recorded with the participant's permission, allowing the researchers to transcribe the conversations verbatim for analysis.

To enhance the validity of the data, the researchers employed two techniques

- **Field Notes:** During and immediately after the interviews, the researchers took detailed field notes on the participants' body language, emotional tone, and environmental factors. These notes provided additional context during the analysis stage and helped to capture nuances that might not have been conveyed through words alone [11].
- **Member Checking:** After the initial data analysis, the researchers conducted a follow-up with the participants to validate the findings. This process, known as member checking, allowed participants to review the researchers' interpretations of their interviews, ensuring that their experiences were accurately represented. This step added an extra layer of credibility to the research findings.

Data Analysis

The data collected through interviews were analyzed using Colaizzi's Descriptive Phenomenological Method, a widely used approach in phenomenological research that allows for a systematic exploration of lived experiences. Colaizzi's method consists of seven key steps, each designed to ensure that the analysis captures the depth and authenticity of the participants' experiences

- **Familiarization:** The researchers began by thoroughly reading and re-reading the transcribed interviews to immerse themselves in the data. This initial step was crucial for developing a deep understanding of the narratives and identifying key themes.
- **Identifying Significant Statements:** All statements in the transcripts that directly related to the phenomenon of postpartum motherhood in prison were identified. This step involved highlighting words, phrases, or sentences that seemed particularly meaningful or emotionally charged.

- **Formulating Meanings:** Each significant statement was analyzed to determine its underlying meaning. For example, a mother's description of "feeling trapped" might be interpreted not just as a physical reality, but as an emotional or psychological state influenced by both her incarceration and her postpartum condition.
- **Clustering Themes:** The formulated meanings were grouped into clusters that reflected broader themes in the data. These themes encompassed aspects of the participants' experiences such as the emotional impact of separation from family, challenges in accessing maternal healthcare, and coping strategies in a restrictive environment.
- **Developing an Exhaustive Description:** The researchers then created a detailed description of the phenomenon, integrating all the clustered themes. This description offered a comprehensive view of the PMDLs' experiences, highlighting the multidimensional aspects of their lives as incarcerated mothers.
- **Producing the Fundamental Structure:** The exhaustive description was condensed into a fundamental structure that captured the essence of the PMDLs' experiences. This structure was a distilled version of the data that retained its richness and complexity, while focusing on the most significant aspects of the participants' narratives.
- **Seeking Verification:** Finally, the researchers returned to the participants to verify the accuracy of their findings. Through member checking, participants had the opportunity to confirm or clarify the researchers' interpretations, ensuring that the final analysis truly reflected their lived experiences.

This systematic approach to data analysis ensured that the results were deeply rooted in the participants' own words and experiences, while also allowing for the emergence of broader themes that could contribute to the existing body of knowledge on postpartum care and motherhood in prison settings.

Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of this study, special attention was paid to the ethical principles of autonomy, confidentiality, and beneficence. The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Ethics Review Board (IERB), ensuring that the study met the highest ethical standards in line with international guidelines for research involving human subjects. The study also adhered to the Data Sharing Agreement provided by the prison facilities, ensuring that all legal and procedural requirements were followed when accessing sensitive data related to the participants.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were provided with clear information about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights as participants. They were assured that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any point without repercussions. Pseudonyms were used throughout the study to protect the identities of the Postpartum Mothers Deprived of Liberty (PMDLs), and all data were stored securely, with strict access controls to prevent unauthorized access. The confidentiality of the participants was maintained throughout the study, with measures in place to ensure that no personally identifiable information could be traced back to any individual.

By following these ethical protocols, the research prioritized the well-being of the participants while ensuring that the findings

contributed meaningfully to the understanding of postpartum motherhood within prison settings.

Results

Table 1: Demographic Profile of the PMDLs

Participant ID	No. of Children	Length of Stay in Prison
PMDL 1	6	1 year
PMDL 2	3	2 months
PMDL 3	4	9 months
PMDL 4	3	8 months
PMDL 5	4	1 year
PMDL 6	3	2 years
PMDL 7	2	7 months

The demographic profile of the seven Postpartum Mothers Deprived of Liberty (PMDLs) in the study highlights a diverse range of ages, number of children, and lengths of incarceration. The mothers' ages range from 24 to 35, indicating a mix of younger and more mature women, with varying life and motherhood experiences. The number of children these mothers have is significant, with some having as many as six, reflecting their maternal responsibilities both inside and outside of prison. The diverse number of children suggests that their caregiving experiences may influence their postpartum experiences while incarcerated.

The length of stay in prison varied widely among the participants, ranging from two months to two years. This variation may reflect different stages of adjustment to prison life and its impact on their role as mothers. Additionally, the duration of postpartum status, which ranges from one month to nine months, provides insight into how these mothers may be coping with their postpartum period under incarceration. The differences in postpartum duration suggest that the participants were at different stages of recovery and adaptation to motherhood in prison, which could impact their emotional and physical well-being.

This demographic diversity among the PMDLs contributes to the richness of the data by offering multiple perspectives on the challenges and experiences of postpartum motherhood in a prison setting. The variety in age, number of children, length of imprisonment, and postpartum duration allows for a more comprehensive exploration of how different factors shape the mothers' experiences in terms of health, caregiving, and emotional coping mechanisms. This demographic variation helps in understanding how individual circumstances can influence the broader themes identified in the study, such as access to healthcare, emotional support, and the challenges of raising a child while incarcerated.

The analysis of the lived experiences of Postpartum Mothers Deprived of Liberty (PMDLs) in this study revealed several emergent themes that highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of motherhood in prison. These themes reflect the emotional, psychological, and practical challenges faced by incarcerated mothers as they navigate postpartum life while confined. Through a detailed examination of their narratives, the study uncovered the following key themes: "Accepting the Inevitable: The Problems Arise After Birth," "Amusement Amidst Dilemma," "Supporting the Unsung: Building Bridges for Mothers Behind Bars," "Resilient Solitude: Embracing Inner Peace Amidst Maternal Separation" and "Maternal Bonds in Confinement: Underdeveloped Maternal Identity."

Table 2: Theme Cluster and Formulate Meanings under the Emergent Theme "Accepting the Inevitable: The Problems Arise After Birth"

Emergent Theme	Theme Cluster	Formulated Meanings
Accepting the Inevitable: The Problems Arise After Birth	Postpartum Separation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disrupted maternal-infant bonding Longing for her infant Worries about infant custody Travel limits breastfeeding
	Emotional Dilemma	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mixed emotion due to separation. Acceptance of necessary separation Recognize the limits of being apart from your infant.
	Birthing Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Struggle due to lack of emotional support. Lack of familial companion Prison births are difficult Lack of spousal support is a dilemm.

The first emergent theme from the study, "Accepting the Inevitable: The Problems Arise After Birth," shed light on the complex and multifaceted challenges faced by postpartum mothers in prison. This theme encompasses the stark realities of limited healthcare, the emotional trauma of separation from newborns, and the difficulties in maintaining essential maternal bonds. These issues deeply affect their mental health and overall well-being, emphasizing the need for comprehensive policies and resources that support incarcerated mothers. Enhancing maternal care in prisons not only addresses the immediate needs of mothers but also supports broader societal health by fostering healthier mother-child relationships, even in the most challenging environments.

Postpartum Separation

One of the most heart-wrenching challenges faced by incarcerated mothers is the separation from their newborns shortly after birth. This separation is often mandated by prison regulations or necessitated by the lack of adequate facilities to care for newborns within the prison environment. The emotional and physical gap this creates is profound, as illustrated by PMDL 3's experience:

"The hardest part for me was when my family had taken my baby away from me. I had him for only two days in the hospital."

This statement highlights the intense emotional pain and sense of loss that postpartum mothers endure when they are forcibly separated from their newborns. The brief initial bonding time is abruptly cut short, leading to significant emotional distress that can impact their mental health and impede the natural mother-infant

bonding process. Addressing these separation issues is crucial, as maintaining maternal bonds, even in constrained circumstances, is essential for the mental health of the mother and the developmental health of the infant.

Emotional Dilemma

The emotional landscape for postpartum mothers in prison is complex and fraught with contradictory feelings. The joy of childbirth is often overshadowed by the dread of impending separation from the child. This duality of emotions is profoundly expressed by PMDL 7:

“When I gave birth and before my baby was brought back home, my only priority had been him. That was the reason why it was hard for me when it was time to send him back, and I couldn’t do anything but accept it.”

This quotation reflects the emotional turmoil these mothers face, focusing intensely on their newborns during the brief time they are together. The necessity of separation, whether for medical or practical reasons, forces a painful acceptance that can help some mothers cope with their circumstances. This acceptance, however, is a double-edged sword, providing relief at the expense of emotional anguish.

Birthing Challenges

The experience of childbirth in prison is marked by the absence of a traditional support system, which can heighten feelings of isolation and anxiety. The lack of familial support during labor and delivery exacerbates the emotional and physical challenges of childbirth, as described by PMDL 4:

“It was painful when I gave birth without my husband beside me.”

This participant's experience underscores the significant role that emotional support plays in managing the pains of childbirth. The absence of loved ones not only intensifies the physical pain but also amplifies the psychological hardship, highlighting the critical need for supportive measures during labor and delivery in prison settings.

Table 3: Theme Cluster and Formulate Meanings under the Emergent Theme “Amusement Amidst Dilemma”

Emergent Theme	Theme Cluster	Formulated Meanings
Amusement Amidst Dilemma	Temporary escape from longingness/ Distraction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engaging in livelihood programs inside the prison Developed a new skill
	Talk Therapy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seeking solace through shared stories Counseling build resilience against depression.

The theme "Amusement Amidst Dilemma" captures the strategies employed by postpartum mothers deprived of liberty (PMDLs) to cope with the emotional and psychological challenges of imprisonment, particularly maternal separation. "Amusement" refers to activities that entertain or distract PMDLs, offering temporary relief from the emotional pain of being separated from their infants. This theme addresses how PMDLs cope with the difficulties of confinement, with two key clusters emerging: Temporary Escape from Longingness/Distraction and Talk Therapy.

Temporary Escape from Longingness/Distraction

PMDLs often seek out distractions to escape the emotional pain of being separated from their newborns. Many turn to livelihood programs within the correctional facility, such as crafting and skill-building activities, to preoccupy themselves and manage their stress. These activities not only serve as a distraction from their longing for their infants but also provide them with valuable skills for life beyond prison. As PMDL 1 described:

“I do different things here. I joined livelihood. I make beads, wallets, and other things. I keep myself busy to lessen the stress.”

This statement highlights the therapeutic role of productive tasks in helping PMDLs cope with the emotional distress of separation. By staying occupied, they mitigate the feelings of loneliness and grief, while also building a sense of purpose and preparing for eventual reintegration into society. These activities create a temporary respite from their emotional struggles and contribute to their mental well-being.

Talk Therapy

Talk therapy, whether through peer support or formal counseling, plays a significant role in helping PMDLs process their emotions. By verbalizing their feelings, especially to fellow inmates or correctional facility personnel, they find relief and support in their shared experiences. PMDL 2 emphasized the importance of counseling sessions provided by correctional facility staff:

“Correctional facility personnel conduct counseling to PMDLs who just gave birth. We need it to avoid the factors that trigger postpartum depression; they are afraid of it and think that I might experience it.”

This insight underscores the critical role of talk therapy in fostering emotional well-being among PMDLs. The support from both peers and staff helps to prevent postpartum depression and enables PMDLs to cope more effectively with their circumstances. Counseling offers a structured way for them to express their emotions, ensuring they receive the psychological support needed during such a vulnerable time.

"Amusement Amidst Dilemma" illustrates how PMDLs manage the challenges of maternal separation and imprisonment through distraction and emotional support. Livelihood programs offer temporary relief and skill-building opportunities, while talk therapy provides an essential outlet for emotional expression. These coping strategies not only alleviate the immediate emotional burdens of maternal separation but also equip PMDLs with the resilience and skills necessary for reintegration into society. Through these initiatives, incarcerated mothers can better navigate their complex emotional landscapes and improve their overall well-being during confinement.

Table 4: Theme Cluster and Formulate Meanings under the Emergent Theme “Supporting the Unsung: Building Bridges for Mothers behind bars”

Emergent Theme	Theme Cluster	Formulated Meanings
Supporting the Unsung: Building Bridges for Mothers behind bars	Family Orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family visits and calls are vital links across distance Strength in knowing that her loved ones are safe Online communication with the family
	Social and Operational Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Empowered by BJMP staff support Needs were provided after birth. BJMP ensuring the safety of maternal health

The theme "Supporting the Unsung: Building Bridges for Mothers Behind Bars" highlights the critical interpersonal and institutional support needed by postpartum mothers deprived of liberty (PMDLs). The metaphor of "building bridges" symbolizes the connections maintained through visits and video calls, which shorten the emotional and physical distance between PMDLs and their families. The term "Supporting the Unsung" underscores the often-overlooked importance of both familial and institutional support, which play a significant role in the well-being of these incarcerated mothers. This theme also addresses the second problem statement, exploring how PMDLs manage the struggles they face during imprisonment. Two distinct clusters emerged within this theme: Family Orientation and Social and Operational Support.

Family Orientation

Maintaining emotional bonds with family members, especially children, is a crucial source of strength for PMDLs. Regular visits and video calls provide a vital lifeline to the outside world, offering emotional reassurance and a sense of normalcy amidst the hardships of incarceration. These connections help mitigate feelings of loneliness and anxiety, enabling PMDLs to maintain a sense of continuity in their familial roles. As PMDL 2 expressed:

“Video calls are our only connection; I call my in-laws to see my baby. Seeing them brings comfort to me.”

This statement illustrates the profound emotional relief that virtual contact provides. The ability to see and interact with their child, even through a screen, offers a much-needed sense of comfort, helping to reduce the emotional strain of separation. These calls not only strengthen maternal bonds but also provide an avenue for PMDLs to stay engaged in their child’s life, even while incarcerated. This highlights the vital role technology plays in supporting the mental well-being of imprisoned mothers, bridging the gap created by physical separation and fostering emotional stability.

Social and Operational Support

In addition to familial support, the role of prison personnel and institutional structures is critical in helping PMDLs navigate the challenges of pregnancy, postpartum recovery, and maternal health. BJMP staff, along with healthcare services, play an instrumental role in addressing the physical and emotional needs of incarcerated mothers. As PMDL 5 recounted:

“It was a difficult pregnancy since it had been seven years since my last one. When I was imprisoned here, I was already experiencing bleeding, which led to frequent emergencies. Thankfully, once I stayed here, I received proper care, and I was taken to the hospital every week.”

This vivid account highlights the significant challenges faced by postpartum mothers in prison, particularly when dealing with complicated pregnancies. Despite her difficult circumstances, PMDL 5 acknowledges the consistent medical care and attention she received, including weekly hospital visits. This underscores the importance of institutional support in safeguarding the health and well-being of PMDLs. The availability of proper healthcare and the responsiveness of prison personnel are crucial in addressing maternal health concerns, ensuring that imprisoned mothers receive the necessary medical interventions. These services not only provide physical care but also contribute to the emotional reassurance that their health and that of their unborn or newborn child are being prioritized.

"Supporting the Unsung: Building Bridges for Mothers Behind Bars" emphasizes the dual importance of familial and institutional support in the lives of PMDLs. Family visits and video calls serve as emotional lifelines, helping to alleviate feelings of isolation and anxiety, while institutional support, particularly from BJMP personnel and healthcare providers, is critical in addressing postpartum and maternal health needs. Together, these efforts help PMDLs manage their challenges more effectively, providing them with the emotional and physical care necessary to foster a sense of connection and stability during imprisonment. These "bridges"—whether through technology or institutional care—are essential in supporting the well-being of incarcerated mothers and ensuring that they can continue to fulfill their maternal roles despite the confines of the prison system.

Table 5: Theme Cluster and Formulate Meanings under the emergent theme “Resilient Solitude: Embracing Inner Peace Amidst Maternal Separation”

Emergent Theme	Theme Cluster	Formulated Meanings
Resilient Solitude: Embracing Inner Peace Amidst Maternal Separation”	Future Outlook/ Spiritual Devotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hope of being reunited with family Motivating self-thru prayers. Thinking about her children fuels life. Accepting separation.
	Self-Resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> She stands strong alone Private healingthrough silent reflection

The theme "Resilient Solitude: Embracing Inner Peace Amidst Maternal Separation" reflects the delicate balance between hardship and hope experienced by postpartum mothers deprived of liberty (PMDLs). It acknowledges the emotional toll of separation from their children while also emphasizing the inner strength and peace that PMDLs cultivate through faith, hope, and self-reliance. This theme answers the second problem statement, focusing on how PMDLs manage the challenges of imprisonment. The two clusters, Future Outlook/Spiritual Devotion and Self-Resilience, illustrate how these mothers cope with their struggles by embracing spirituality and cultivating personal strength.

Future Outlook/Spiritual Devotion

Spirituality plays a central role in helping PMDLs maintain hope and emotional resilience during their time in prison. The anticipation of a future reunion with their children, coupled with the strength gained through prayers and faith, offers these mothers a sense of purpose and motivation. Their spiritual devotion becomes a source of comfort and mental fortitude as they navigate the pain of separation. PMDL 1 beautifully captures this sentiment:

“To remain positive and I continue praying that one day we can be together, and that is the only thing I hope for.”

This statement underscores the power of faith and positive thinking as lifelines for PMDLs. The act of praying and holding onto the hope of reuniting with their families gives them strength to endure their current hardships. For many, the thought of being with their children again becomes a guiding force that sustains their emotional well-being. Their spirituality fosters a deep sense of acceptance and resilience, transforming their separation into a period of quiet reflection and inner growth. Faith and the prospect of a better future provide these mothers with the emotional support they need to persevere.

Self-Resilience

Beyond their spiritual devotion, PMDLs demonstrate remarkable self-resilience by adapting to the challenging circumstances of prison life. Despite limited resources and the isolation imposed by imprisonment, these mothers find ways to become self-sufficient, using their inner strength to meet both their personal and maternal needs. PMDL 5 highlights this resilience:

“There was no one. I supported myself by providing laundry services and ironing their clothes.”

This testimony reveals the ingenuity and determination of PMDLs to not only survive but thrive in their confined environment. By taking on chores within the facility, such as laundry and ironing, they generate an income that allows them to support themselves and contribute to the well-being of their children. This sense of self-reliance empowers PMDLs to overcome feelings of helplessness and reclaim control over their lives. Their ability to adapt to their surroundings and create opportunities for self-sufficiency is a powerful testament to their resilience. Even in solitude, they find ways to provide for themselves and maintain a sense of dignity and purpose, showcasing their unwavering resolve to overcome adversity.

The theme of "Resilient Solitude: Embracing Inner Peace Amidst Maternal Separation" highlights the dual experiences of struggle and hope faced by postpartum mothers in prison. Through Future Outlook/Spiritual Devotion, PMDLs find strength in spirituality, prayer, and the hope of family reunification. Faith serves as a

crucial coping mechanism, helping them embrace the emotional pain of separation while maintaining a sense of hope for the future. Simultaneously, **Self-Resilience** illustrates the resourcefulness and determination of these mothers as they navigate the harsh realities of prison life. By performing chores and generating income within the facility, they demonstrate their ability to adapt and thrive, maintaining self-sufficiency even in isolation. Together, these clusters reveal how faith, hope, and personal resilience empower PMDLs to achieve emotional well-being and inner peace amidst the challenges of maternal separation. Through spirituality and self-reliance, these mothers find the strength to endure their circumstances and cultivate hope for a better future.

Table 6: Theme Cluster and Formulate Meanings under the emergent theme “Maternal Bonds in Confinement: Underdeveloped Maternal Identity”

Emergent Theme	Theme Cluster	Formulated Meanings
Maternal Bonds in Confinement: Underdeveloped Maternal Identity	Loss of Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feel adrift to the new role. • Still yearning for the lost self. • Mother’s silent hope for infant’s care
	Non-biological Mother	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maternal care beyond bloodlines. • Step-in mothering

The theme "Maternal Bonds in Confinement: Underdeveloped Maternal Identity" delves into the emotional and psychological challenges postpartum mothers deprived of liberty (PMDLs) face as their maternal roles are redefined by the prison environment. The confinement significantly impacts their self-perception as mothers, leading to a sense of identity loss and an altered connection with their children. Many PMDLs compensate for this loss by assuming maternal roles toward younger inmates, attempting to fulfill their need to nurture and care for others. This theme answers the second problem statement, focusing on how imprisonment disrupts the development and expression of a mother’s identity. The theme is divided into two key clusters: Loss of Identity and Non-Biological Motherhood.

Loss of Identity

The experience of being separated from their children profoundly affects how PMDLs perceive themselves as mothers. The inability to fulfill maternal responsibilities during critical bonding periods disrupts their sense of identity, leaving them feeling disconnected from their roles as caregivers. This emotional struggle is highlighted by PMDL 5, who shares:

“Being a mother, it was very difficult because I was not able to fulfill my responsibilities to my baby who was away from me.”

This quote illustrates the deep emotional toll that separation takes on these mothers. The inability to physically care for their children causes them to question their role and purpose as mothers. For PMDLs, maternal identity is deeply tied to their ability to provide, nurture, and protect. However, imprisonment creates a physical and emotional distance that disrupts this fundamental bond, leading to feelings of guilt, inadequacy, and loss of self. The sense of maternal identity becomes underdeveloped, as these women are

forced to navigate their roles without the direct interaction and care they wish to provide to their infants. This disconnection from their children creates an internal conflict, as they attempt to reconcile their desire to be mothers with the reality of their confinement.

Non-Biological Motherhood

To cope with the void left by the absence of their own children, many PMDLs adopt a maternal role toward younger inmates, nurturing them as they would their own. This phenomenon of non-biological motherhood reflects their enduring maternal instincts and the desire to fulfill their identity as caregivers, even within the constraints of prison life. PMDL 7 reflects on this role:

“There is someone here younger than us whom I care and treat like my child. She said that she felt the same way because she was 25 years old when she was separated from her baby.”

This statement highlights how PMDLs extend their maternal care to younger inmates who may be similarly vulnerable, creating surrogate maternal bonds. These non-biological relationships provide emotional fulfillment for both parties. For the PMDL, it offers a way to express her nurturing instincts and maintain a semblance of her maternal role despite being physically separated from her biological children. For the younger inmates, these surrogate maternal figures provide emotional support, guidance, and comfort, fostering a sense of family within the prison community. The reciprocal nature of these relationships—where younger inmates also feel a sense of attachment and care—demonstrates the depth of connection and emotional stability that can emerge from these non-traditional maternal bonds.

The theme of “Maternal Bonds in Confinement: Underdeveloped Maternal Identity” sheds light on the emotional struggles and identity challenges faced by postpartum mothers in prison. The Loss of Identity cluster reveals the profound impact that physical separation from their children has on PMDLs, disrupting their maternal self-perception and leaving them grappling with feelings of inadequacy and guilt. Imprisonment not only isolates them from their children but also forces them to redefine their roles as mothers under severely constrained circumstances.

In response to this identity disruption, many PMDLs turn to Non-Biological Motherhood, forming surrogate maternal bonds with younger inmates. These relationships offer emotional stability, a sense of purpose, and a way for these women to maintain their maternal instincts. These bonds, though non-biological, provide both the PMDLs and their surrogate children with a sense of belonging and comfort, highlighting the resilience and adaptability of maternal instincts.

Ultimately, “Maternal Bonds in Confinement: Underdeveloped Maternal Identity” underscores the importance of maternal identity for these women and how they navigate the emotional challenges posed by their imprisonment. While the separation from their children may disrupt the natural progression of their maternal role, PMDLs find ways to redefine and express their maternal identity, showcasing their emotional strength and adaptability in even the most difficult circumstances.

Central Phenomenon

The study uncovers the central phenomenon called “Custodial Shadows,” which encapsulates the complex and emotionally charged experiences of postpartum mothers navigating life in prison. This term represents both the tangible limitations imposed

by incarceration and the emotional weight carried by women who must balance their maternal responsibilities with the harsh realities of confinement. The “shadow” symbolizes the emotional darkness that pervades their lives, as they grapple with the anguish of separation from their newborns and the struggle to maintain their maternal identity in a restrictive environment.

Emotional Disconnection and Loss of Maternal Identity

The early separation of mother and child, a key aspect of “Custodial Shadows,” leads to significant disruptions in the mother-child attachment process. The postpartum period, typically marked by bonding, becomes a source of anxiety and disconnection for PMDLs due to time constraints, inadequate resources, and the barriers created by imprisonment. One of the most profound impacts of this separation is the loss of maternal identity. For these women, the inability to perform their maternal duties erodes their self-perception as mothers. The physical absence of their children amplifies feelings of guilt, inadequacy, and anxiety, hindering the natural development of their maternal role.

Coping Mechanisms and Sources of Strength

Despite the immense challenges, PMDLs find ways to cope with their circumstances. Many divert their attention through activities such as crafting and participating in prison programs, which offer temporary relief from their emotional distress. These activities provide a sense of normalcy and purpose, serving as a mental escape from the overwhelming longing for their children. Additionally, the support from their families plays a crucial role in maintaining their emotional well-being. Visits from loved one’s help bridge the physical and emotional distance, allowing PMDLs to reconnect with their identities as mothers, even if only temporarily.

PMDLs also rely on self-reliance and spiritual devotion to sustain hope. Their faith becomes a source of strength, helping them endure their imprisonment and look forward to the possibility of reuniting with their families after release. These coping mechanisms demonstrate the resilience of PMDLs in the face of profound emotional and psychological challenges.

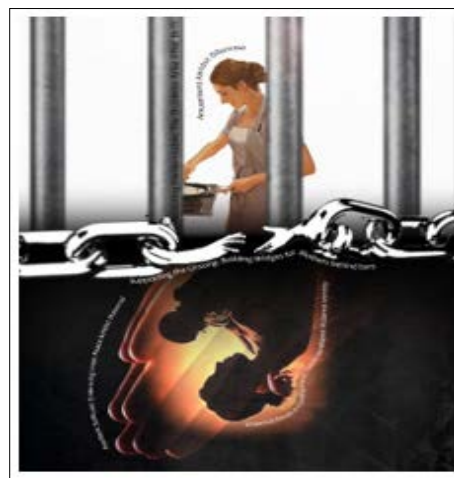


Figure 1: Visual Representation of “Custodial Shadows”

Figure 1, which visually represents the “Custodial Shadows” phenomenon, captures the essence of these lived experiences through symbolic imagery. The central figure, a woman behind bars, holding a pot, reflects the internal struggle of a mother torn between her maternal instincts and the restrictions of prison life. The image is divided by a chain, symbolizing both the physical

separation from her child and the connection maintained through family support and the prison system.

Key elements of the figure include

- **Bars:** Represent the limitations imposed on the mother, restricting her ability to bond with her child and fulfill her maternal role.
- **Mother Holding a Pot, Lost in Thought:** Symbolizes the activities inside prison that temporarily distract PMDLs from their emotional struggles, though their solitude and worries remain.
- **Chains with a Reaching Hand:** Illustrate the support provided by family visits and prison personnel, which helps bridge the gap between PMDLs and their loved ones.
- **Praying Hands:** Reflect the faith and inner strength that sustain PMDLs, offering them hope and resilience in the face of their struggles.
- **Silhouette of a Woman Holding her Child:** Represents the desire for freedom and the maternal identity that remains, despite the limitations of imprisonment. The child in her arms symbolizes a future that has been put on hold but not forgotten.

Breakdown of Themes in Relation to the Visual Representation

- **Postpartum Separation, Emotional Dilemma and Birthing Challenges:** The bars in the figure symbolize the physical and emotional barriers that prevent PMDLs from fully embracing their maternal roles. Imprisonment leads to disrupted mother-child bonding and emotional turmoil, particularly during the postpartum period, when maternal care and support are most critical.
- **Amusement Amidst Dilemma:** The mother holding the pot reflects the distractions and activities available to PMDLs within prison, providing a temporary escape from their emotional pain. These activities, while helpful, cannot fully alleviate the deep longing they feel for their children.
- **Family Orientation and Social Support:** The chains and reaching hands signify the crucial role of family support in maintaining the emotional well-being of PMDLs. Visits from family members help reinforce their identity as mothers, even within the constraints of prison life. The support from prison staff, particularly during childbirth, also plays a vital role in ensuring the safety and well-being of both mother and child.
- **Loss of Identity and Non-Biological Motherhood:** The silhouette of the woman holding her child represents the complex reality of PMDLs' maternal identity. While they are physically separated from their biological children, many take on surrogate maternal roles, caring for younger inmates. This helps fulfill their need to nurture, but also underscores the limitations placed on their ability to fully experience motherhood.

The central phenomenon of "Custodial Shadows" encapsulates the multifaceted emotional and psychological experiences of postpartum mothers in prison. It highlights the profound impact of separation from their children, the struggle to maintain a maternal identity, and the ways in which PMDLs cope with their challenging circumstances. Through faith, family support, and surrogate motherhood, these women demonstrate resilience and adaptability, navigating the darkness of imprisonment while holding on to the hope of reuniting with their children in the future.

The visual representation of "Custodial Shadows" serves as a poignant metaphor for the lived experiences of PMDLs, capturing

the emotional, physical, and spiritual challenges they face as they attempt to reconcile their roles as mothers within the confines of incarceration.

Discussion

The study revealed significant emotional and psychological challenges faced by postpartum mothers deprived of liberty (PMDLs). These women, confined to prison, are forced to navigate the emotional turmoil of maternal-infant separation, which often manifests in anxiety, sadness, and deep emotional distress. Their sense of motherhood is challenged, and maintaining a maternal identity becomes an uphill battle. A strong support system, both within the prison facility and from external sources like family, plays an indispensable role in helping them cope with the separation and maintain their identity as mothers. The term custodial shadows metaphorically represent the lingering emotional and psychological impact of imprisonment on these mothers, casting a "shadow" over their identities and relationships with their children.

The theme *Accepting the Inevitable: Problems Arise After Birth* reflects the profound shift PMDLs experience from the anticipation of childbirth to the stark realities of postpartum life in prison. The postpartum period, which typically should be filled with joy and bonding, is instead marked by hardship, as mothers are forced to come to terms with the complexities of their new roles. One of the most significant issues is postpartum separation, wherein mothers are physically distanced from their newborns, severely disrupting maternal-infant bonding. This lack of proximity hinders breastfeeding, crucial in the early stages of a child's life, and can intensify the emotional challenges faced by PMDLs. Studies have shown that maternal-infant separation contributes significantly to the development of postpartum depression (PPD), adding to the already overwhelming emotional burden experienced by imprisoned mothers [12].

The *emotional dilemma* theme captures the deep distress caused by the enforced separation of PMDLs from their infants. This separation not only disrupts maternal bonding but also undermines the development of a strong maternal identity, leading many PMDLs to feel a sense of loss and confusion about their role as mothers [13]. This dilemma is multifaceted, affecting PMDLs physically as well as emotionally. Birthing challenges compound their struggles, as these mothers often have limited access to quality prenatal care. The stress associated with giving birth in a prison setting, coupled with the possibility of immediate separation from their newborns, heightens the emotional burden. Research has consistently highlighted the need for high-quality healthcare for imprisoned pregnant women, yet due to their incarceration, this care is often neglected, leading to poor maternal and neonatal outcomes [14].

Despite the heavy emotional toll, PMDLs find ways to cope, as illustrated in the theme *Amusement Amidst Dilemma*. This theme highlights how, despite their bleak circumstances, PMDLs engage in activities that provide temporary relief from their emotional turmoil. Engaging in prison programs, hobbies, and crafting activities allows them to momentarily escape the harsh realities of their situation [15]. By participating in livelihood activities, exercising, or crafting, they keep themselves preoccupied, which helps to alleviate the stress and anxiety of separation. These distractions are critical in providing PMDLs with a sense of normalcy and purpose, however limited, within the confines of prison. Such activities are proven to offer emotional relief, reducing

the overall distress of being separated from their newborns [16].

Another significant coping mechanism identified in the study is *talk therapy*. This informal therapy involves PMDLs sharing their stories and experiences with fellow inmates, creating a supportive environment where they can relate to one another. By voicing their emotions and feelings, PMDLs can process their grief, anger, and sadness. Talk therapy has been shown to play a crucial role in reducing maternal distress and improving mental health outcomes [17]. It offers PMDLs an opportunity to express themselves, fostering emotional healing in the process.

Support from both prison personnel and family members also plays a vital role in bridging the emotional gap caused by maternal separation. The theme *Supporting the Unsung: Building Bridges for Mothers Behind Bars* highlights the importance of external support in helping PMDLs navigate the complexities of motherhood in a prison setting. Family visits, in particular, provide PMDLs with emotional encouragement and help them maintain a connection with their children. Prison personnel, especially those involved in the care of pregnant and postpartum mothers, also offer critical support, ensuring the safety and well-being of both mother and child during childbirth and beyond [16].

The theme *Resilient Solitude* emerged from the study, reflecting the ways in which PMDLs develop inner peace through acceptance of their situation. Despite the emotional challenges, these women demonstrate remarkable resilience by focusing on spiritual devotion and maintaining a positive outlook on their future. Many PMDLs turn to faith as a source of strength, relying on prayer and spiritual practices to help them cope with the separation from their newborns. This inner strength allows them to endure the hardships of prison life while holding on to the hope of reuniting with their families upon release [18]. Furthermore, PMDLs' ability to cultivate self-resilience enables them to maintain a sense of autonomy, which is critical for their mental well-being. By developing this emotional and spiritual resilience, PMDLs are better able to care for themselves and retain hope for the future, despite the constraints of imprisonment.

The maternal identity of PMDLs is often compromised due to the forced separation from their infants. The theme *Maternal Bonds in Confinement: Underdeveloped Maternal Identity* addresses the weakening of this identity, as the limitations of prison life prevent PMDLs from fully embracing and performing their roles as mothers [19]. The constraints of imprisonment create emotional and psychological barriers that disrupt the natural process of maternal role attainment. The separation from their infants leads to feelings of inadequacy, guilt, and anxiety, further eroding their sense of self as mothers. These challenges, coupled with the emotional and psychological strain, prevent PMDLs from fully realizing their maternal potential, resulting in poor maternal role attainment [20,21].

In some cases, PMDLs adopt the role of a non-biological mother as a coping mechanism. This involves channeling their maternal instincts toward others in the prison environment, such as fellow inmates, to mitigate the longing they feel for their own children. By providing care and emotional support to those around them, PMDLs attempt to fill the void created by their separation from their infants, temporarily easing their emotional pain.

Overall, this study effectively analyzed how imprisonment disrupts the natural process of maternal role attainment. It underscored

the profound emotional and psychological effects of maternal separation and highlighted the coping mechanisms that PMDLs develop to navigate these challenges. The findings illustrate the resilience of these women in the face of overwhelming adversity and shed light on the need for improved support systems within prisons to address the unique challenges faced by postpartum mothers.

Conclusion

This study highlights that maternal separation is the most challenging aspect of being a PMDL. The physical disconnection from their infants disrupts the formation of maternal bonds, while early separation undermines emotional attachment, leaving mothers struggling with their perception of motherhood. The root cause of this separation lies in the inability of correctional facilities to provide a nurturing environment suitable for newborns, emphasizing that prisons are far from ideal places for postpartum care.

The emergent themes in this study—maternal struggles, coping mechanisms, strengthened spirituality, and maternal identity—underscore the need for tailored programs to support postpartum mothers in prison. These programs are crucial in addressing the unique emotional, physical, and psychological challenges that these women face. Mercer's Maternal Role Attainment Theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how imprisonment disrupts the stages of maternal identity formation, particularly the role of emotional adaptation and the need for strong support systems.

By giving voice to the experiences of postpartum mothers in prison, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of their challenges and emphasizes the urgency of providing comprehensive support and services to incarcerated women, especially during the critical postpartum period.

Clinical Implications

The study on the lived experiences of Postpartum Mothers deprived of liberty has yielded some recommendations for improving and enhancing the well-being of the affected individuals. Given that maternal separation was identified as the most challenging aspect of being a PMDL, a holistic approach that would cover the physical, emotional, mental, and social needs of the PMDLs through a comprehensive program that will foster rehabilitation and empowerment for the mothers during the postpartum period. This program would prevent postpartum depression and facilitate an early detection. It would be done through counselling and focus group discussions for an effective and meaningful engagement.

Additionally, to effectively address the holistic needs of PMDLs, jail nurses should get thorough training in mental health care. This training should address mental health assessment and diagnosis, therapeutic communication and counseling approaches, medication management, crisis intervention and suicide prevention, cultural competency, and ethical issues. By equipping nurses with these qualities, we can improve the quality of care of the PMDLs and for their overall well-being. Moreover, the authorities should modify the regulation in visiting hours, and allotted a budget that will create an area to improve the mother and child bonding

Limitation

While this study provides useful information, numerous limitations should be noted. First, the study's sample size may restrict the findings' generalizability. This study has a limited

number of participants, and while qualitative research favors depth over breadth, a larger sample size may have offered a deeper understanding of the range of experiences within this population. Furthermore, this study only looked at PMDLs in a specific jail in the province of Bulacan, which may restrict the findings' applicability to other prisons in other cities or provinces.

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Ethical Approval: The study was approved by the Dr. Yanga's Colleges, Inc. Research Ethics Committee on June 2024. Informed Consent/ Permission to conduct the study was also obtained. The study-maintained privacy, confidentiality, anonymity, and the participants participated voluntarily and were free to withdraw participation at any time.

Informed Consent: The participants returned a signed copy of the written consent form.

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