

Article

Wounded Masculinities Behind Bars: The Role of Prison Policies in Men's Behaviour Within Intimate Relationships

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Abstract

Men's incarceration disrupts their intimate relationships by destabilising their masculine identity built on autonomy, virility, and the role of the provider. This article examines how incarcerated men respond to this destabilisation within their intimate relationships and how penal policies shape these responses. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in prisons in France and Spain, this article combines participant observation with semi-structured interviews involving incarcerated men and prison professionals. The analysis shows that incarceration initially produces jealousy among incarcerated individuals and drives attempts to control female partners, as men seek to reassert their threatened masculine position within the relationship—a trend observed across both countries. However, these dynamics develop differently in each country over time. In France, the state's limited and inconsistent implementation of policies addressing gender and violence against women allows control-oriented practices within couples to persist, often taking the form of coercive control. In Spain, by contrast, gender-focused prison policies and rehabilitation programs aim to foster emotional reflexivity and self-regulation, leading to incarcerated individuals seeking to gain control over their self rather than their romantic partners. These findings suggest that prison policies shape men's intimate relationships and may contribute to reducing violent behaviours and fostering more respectful forms of intimacy.

Keywords: coercive control; ethnography; incarcerated individuals; intimate relationships; international comparisons; masculinity; penal policies; violence against women

1. Introduction

As of 2025, 1,107,921 people are currently detained in correctional facilities administered by the member states of the Council of Europe (Aebi and Cocco 2025). The daily lives of these individuals are structured by the carceral institution, which, like any institution, relies on rules and procedures aimed at stabilising behaviours and reducing uncertainty (Vigour 2018). While prisons can be described as “total institutions” (Goffman 1961), this characterisation stems less from a complete separation from the outside world than from their capacity to regulate nearly all aspects of life (Crewe et al. 2017). As prisoners adapt to this institutional environment, they reconstruct their identities to achieve recognition and legitimacy within the prison social order. This process is shaped by the pre-existing values, hierarchies, and social codes that organise the prison social world (Ugelvik 2014). Imprisonment also transforms the ways incarcerated individuals maintain, negotiate, and redefine their relationships with people outside prison because identities are enacted not only within prison but also through interactions beyond its walls.



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Among the social ties most profoundly affected by incarceration are those with relatives, particularly intimate partners. Across Council of Europe member states, prison populations are overwhelmingly male, with a median of 94.5% men (Aebi and Cocco 2025). The relatives who maintain contact with these imprisoned men are predominantly women (Touraut 2012), most often girlfriends or wives (El Atifi and Le Mer 2021). These women experience the consequences of imprisonment alongside their partners. Comfort (2008) conceptualises this phenomenon as “secondary prisonization”, while Touraut (2012) refers to it as the “extended carceral experience”. Both concepts describe the extension of the carceral experience to prisoners’ relatives, who are affected by the practical, emotional, social, and institutional consequences of incarceration from the moment of imprisonment and, in some cases, beyond release.

Recognising the importance of these relationships, penal policies have increasingly emphasised the preservation of family ties. Prison administrations introduced measures aimed at facilitating contact between incarcerated individuals and their relatives (Herzog-Evans 2019). Furthermore, the institutional recognition of the right to family life has primarily been shaped around the figure of the female partner who remains outside the prison, most often portrayed as a mother raising children separated from their incarcerated father (Lancelevée 2011).

Instead of simply interrupting intimate relationships, incarceration restructures their conditions of existence and, in doing so, transforms them. By removing men from the outside world, imprisonment disrupts established roles and the division of labour within couples. Whereas men’s roles within heterosexual relationships may previously have been associated with autonomy, economic provision, authority and virility (Guillaumin 1992), confinement restricts their capacity to act and often leads their partners to take on a greater share of maintaining the relationship and managing everyday life. Virility is understood here as a socially and historically constructed ideal of masculinity that valorises strength, authority, and the capacity to exert control, rather than as an innate male characteristic (Rivoal 2017). Incarceration therefore destabilises the attributes of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1993) while simultaneously intensifying gendered inequalities, as women continue to bear a disproportionate share of care, emotional labour, and relational maintenance (Bajos et al. 2008; Santelli 2025).

Gendered dynamics within these couples must be understood from an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw 1991). Predominantly drawn from working-class backgrounds, incarcerated men are marked by forms of masculine socialisation in which manliness is closely tied to the rejection of homosexuality, a stigma that strongly structures gender norms among young men (Clair 2012). Prison populations are largely young (Aebi and Cocco 2025), a life stage characterised by increasingly diverse conjugal trajectories yet marked by strong normative expectations to form and maintain a stable couple relationship (Bergström et al. 2024). These expectations tend to be particularly salient among younger men, who exhibit a stronger adherence to virility norms than older generations (Haut Conseil à l’Égalité 2025). In addition, prison populations are disproportionately composed of individuals from postcolonial immigrant backgrounds and with limited educational attainment (Rostaing 1997; Chantraine 2003; Daems 2008). Incarceration therefore reflects and concentrates multiple social inequalities which, in some couples, may reinforce gender hierarchies and forms of male control, particularly where women occupy economically and socially vulnerable positions (Schultheis et al. 2009).

Against this backdrop, incarceration produces a central tension within the couple. On the one hand, incarceration deprives men of the roles of provider, protector, and autonomous actor through which ideals of virile masculinity are socially recognised and affirmed (Douris and Roman 2020). As imprisonment strips men of autonomy, economic

resources, and their social position outside prison, status within the prison social world assumes heightened importance. Securing this status depends largely on establishing and maintaining a reputation as a “real man” (Michalski 2015). Consequently, virility is reconfigured around prison-specific norms that valorise toughness, emotional restraint, and the capacity to use violence when necessary (Chauvenet et al. 2008; Actis 2024).

This article examines how the tensions in men’s masculine identities produced by incarceration are expressed within their intimate relationships. It addresses the following question: How does men’s incarceration destabilise masculine identities within intimate relationships, and how do penal policies shape responses to this destabilisation?

Relationships between incarcerated individuals and their partners remain understudied and largely invisible in the literature, a gap that extends further into incarcerated individuals’ family ties (Ricordeau 2008; Touraut 2012). In addition, men’s accounts of their intimate lives can be difficult to access, as masculine socialisation tends to discourage emotional expression (Kaufmann 1993; Molinier 2000; Quennehen 2021). This limitation also affects research on men’s own perspectives on the violence they perpetrate against women, which remains insufficiently explored in academic work (Kelly and Westmarland 2016; Delage 2017; Di Marco and Evans 2025). This gap is particularly significant as incarcerated men who have been violent towards women may continue to pose a risk to their current and future partners after release (Comfort 2008; Di Marco and Evans 2025). At the same time, imprisonment provides a particular opportunity to access men’s perspectives on these issues. Research interviews can provide incarcerated men with a space temporarily removed from the routines of detention, where pervasive mistrust between inmates often constrains emotional expression, as prisoners often perceive one another as potential threats (Liebling 2013). In this context, interviews can enable discussion of topics that are rarely expressed within prison settings, such as emotions and intimate relationships.

In this article, we address these gaps in the literature by examining the conjugal dynamics of men incarcerated in France and Spain through a comparative analysis. This approach moves beyond the singular institutional case-study to explore a broader understanding of prison as a social and political institution, as well as of how penal policies shape intimate relationships. Drawing on qualitative interviews and participant observation with incarcerated men and prison staff, the article shows that incarceration initially reinforces gendered expectations and forms of control within couples. However, differing institutional contexts lead to contrasting trajectories: the persistence of coercive control is observed in France, whereas the emergence of reflexivity and the redefinition of relationships can be seen in Spain. Comparison thus serves as a powerful heuristic tool for understanding how penal policies contribute to the reconfiguration of gender relations within intimate partnerships involving incarcerated men.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Design

This article draws on qualitative data collected as part of a doctoral research project examining intimate relationships in incarceration contexts across three European Union countries (France, Italy, and Spain). The broader study is based on multi-sited qualitative design and includes interviews with incarcerated individuals (both women and men), prison staff, partners of incarcerated individuals, and formerly incarcerated people. The present article focuses specifically on the French and Spanish field sites and relies on a subset of the data, namely interviews and observations conducted with incarcerated men—including several men detained in semi-liberty units in the Spanish field site¹—and prison staff².

The methodological approach is grounded in ethnography, more specifically in “quasi-ethnography” (Cunha 2014) due to the structural limits of immersion in carceral settings. A fully immersive ethnography would require the researcher to be incarcerated. In addition, prisons’ security-oriented nature constrains fieldwork, as researchers are regularly perceived as external and potentially threatening, and are required to comply with the institutional rules of surveillance and control in prisons (Rhodes 2001; Looman and Carl 2015). Despite these limitations, ethnography remains particularly well suited to studying intimate relationships in prison, as it provides access to subjective and affective dimensions of social life that are often difficult to capture through other methods (De Coninck 1982).

This approach is complemented by a multi-sited design inspired by Rostaing’s (2012) notion of “extended situated comparison”, which relies on the exploration of distinct field sites and the multiplication of observation settings and perspectives. Combined with an international comparative perspective, this approach makes it possible to capture local specificities while identifying convergent dynamics of transformation that reflect broader changes in state practices and forms of public action (Vigour 2018).

2.2. Field Sites and Access

Fieldwork was conducted in two prisons in France and one in Spain. In France, research took place between March and August 2023 in two institutions with different sentence regimes. In Spain, fieldwork was conducted between March and August 2024 in a single prison encompassing multiple sentence regimes³.

Access to the field required formal authorisation from prison authorities. In France, approval was obtained from the *Direction de l’administration pénitentiaire* (Directorate of Prison Administration), while in Spain it was granted by the *Generalitat of Catalonia* (Government of Catalonia), which is responsible for prison administration in Catalonia (Tamarit Sumalla 2016). In both cases, access procedures included interviews with administrative representatives and required additional authorisation at the regional and institutional levels.

2.3. Participants and Recruitment

The corpus analysed in this article includes 77 participants: 47 incarcerated men and 30 prison professionals. In France, 27 incarcerated men, 14 prison officers, and 7 reintegration professionals were interviewed. In Spain, the study included 20 incarcerated men (12 in conventional detention and 8 in semi-liberty units), as well as 3 prison officers and 6 reintegration professionals.

Initial contact with prison staff varied across countries. In Spain, a designated staff member served as a key contact upon the researcher’s arrival and introduced the study to other staff, thereby facilitating recruitment. In France, initial interactions took place directly within the prison environment as the researcher approached staff in corridors. In both contexts, recruitment was extended through snowball sampling and through spontaneous interest expressed by staff members.

In both contexts access to incarcerated men was initially mediated by prison staff, who act as gatekeepers by selecting and facilitating contact with potential participants (Rostaing 2017). This selection was complemented by snowball sampling, direct recruitment during collective activities, and spontaneous interest. The researcher’s positionality also shaped access to participants. As a young woman conducting fieldwork in men’s prisons, she was sometimes perceived as someone to be protected, helped, or desired. These gendered dynamics facilitated certain interactions that required ongoing reflexive attention during the research process (Higelin Cruz and Lenarduzzi Vaccaro 2025).

The eligibility criteria for incarcerated men required that participants had been involved in a conjugal relationship during their period of incarceration, regardless of whether

the relationship was ongoing at the time of the interview. Some participants described relationships with women who were themselves incarcerated. However, for the purposes of this article, the analysis focuses exclusively on relationships between incarcerated men and partners living outside prison, in order to examine how incarceration reshapes gender roles and conjugal dynamics when men lose their mobility and autonomy in relation to the outside world while their partners continue to retain them. None of the participants identified as being in a same-sex relationship, a finding consistent with existing literature highlighting the strong stigmatisation of homosexuality in carceral settings (Clemmer 1940; Haye 1998; Ricordeau 2008).

2.4. Observations and Interviews

Observations initially focused on conjugal interactions. The researcher observed encounters between incarcerated men and their partners, as well as the moments when prison staff escorted families to visiting areas. However, such observation raises significant ethical concerns (Rostaing 2017). These encounters involve rare moments of reunion between incarcerated individuals and their relatives and provide access to the couple's intimate sphere—a domain that would ordinarily remain private and inaccessible to outside observers. People in prison are already accustomed to being under constant surveillance and subject to institutionalised voyeurism (Price 2015). To avoid reproducing these dynamics, priority was given to observing participants' everyday prison life.

This involved immersion in different institutional spaces and routines, including corridors, staff break areas, classrooms, and organised activities. These settings made it possible to understand daily practices, institutional constraints, and informal interactions, facilitating access to informal discourse, which often differs from statements made in formal interview settings (Bourdieu 1986).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with both incarcerated men and prison staff. This relatively flexible format was chosen to reduce the constraints associated with the carceral experience and to allow participants greater freedom to articulate their experiences (Rostaing 2017).

Interviews with staff focused on the implementation of penal policies, their perceptions of these policies, and their views on couples affected by incarceration and their role in reintegration processes. Unlike the interviews with incarcerated men, interviews with prison staff were conducted in a single session lasting approximately one hour. The interview guide for prison staff was more concise, and the time available for discussion was generally limited, as interviews typically took place during participants' working hours within the prison. In France, the researcher conducted 21 interviews with prison staff, including 14 prison officers and 7 reintegration professionals. In Spain, 9 interviews were conducted, comprising 3 prison officers and 6 reintegration professionals.

Interviews with incarcerated men were structured around six main themes: (1) conjugal trajectories, including the formation of the relationship and its major turning points; (2) intimacy in detention; (3) the reorganisation of time and space within the couple, shaped by the separation between prison and the outside world and by the different temporal rhythms structuring everyday life on each side; (4) the distribution of family, domestic, and socio-economic roles within the relationship; (5) the gendered division of roles and responsibilities within the couple; and (6) perspectives regarding the continuity of the relationship after release. These interviews were often conducted over multiple sessions (between one and three, with an average of two), each lasting approximately one hour. In France, 42 interviews were conducted with 27 incarcerated men: 14 participants were interviewed once, 11 twice, and 2 three times. In Spain, 25 interviews were conducted with 20 incarcerated men: 16 participants were interviewed once, 3 twice, and 1 three times.

All interviews were conducted in person within prison facilities and in the language of the field site (French or Spanish). Interviews were generally audio-recorded using a dictaphone authorised in advance by prison authorities. Participants could decline recording, in which case detailed handwritten notes were taken.

2.5. Ethical Considerations and Dilemmas

Given the sensitivity of the topic, the research was conducted through continuous ethical and reflexive attention to the researcher's positionality and the relationships established in the field. Rather than being fixed, the researcher's position was relational and constantly negotiated, shifting between proximity and distance according to the interactions and contexts encountered (Zegnani 2015). As a young female sociologist, the researcher's gender proved to be the most salient dimension of this positionality. Being a woman often facilitated discussions about intimacy and emotions, but it also gave rise to forms of excessive proximity, including sexualisation and paternalising behaviour, illustrating how gender relations shaped both the research encounter and the production of ethnographic data (Higelin Cruz and Lenarduzzi Vaccaro 2025). Although gender remained the least malleable aspect of the researcher's identity, other characteristics, including language, dress, and interactional style, were continuously adapted to each context to foster trust while maintaining appropriate professional boundaries. These adjustments allowed the researcher to navigate a shifting insider–outsider continuum (Htong Kham 2024).

Particular care was taken to avoid imposing external interpretations onto participants' narratives, as research with incarcerated individuals inevitably involves interpreting highly vulnerable experiences. The interpretative process therefore sought to remain attentive to participants' own understandings of their experiences while avoiding interpretations that could reproduce existing relations of domination, particularly those structured by gender, race, and class (Zaitzow and Thomas 2003). The comparative design further strengthened this reflexive approach by continually shifting the researcher's perspective across national contexts, preventing the naturalisation of a single institutional or cultural framework and making the contextual nature of both participants' experiences and the researcher's own positionality visible. In reporting the findings, the study adopted the principle of "minimal ethics" (Marchive 2012), guided by the commitment to avoid causing harm to participants while remaining faithful to the complexity of their experiences. Following Bourgois (1995), this meant neither downplaying accounts of violence and suffering nor sensationalising them, but instead presenting them with sufficient contextualisation to preserve both their authenticity and their social meaning.

To protect participants' privacy and ensure that they were fully informed about the research, all participants provided informed consent prior to participation, in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (European Parliament and the Council of European Union 2016). Interview protocols and data collection procedures were reviewed and authorised by the relevant prison authorities. All data was anonymised, and pseudonyms were used throughout this article.

In line with these ethical commitments, the full dataset, including interview transcripts and field notes, cannot be made publicly available. Selected anonymised excerpts have been translated into English by the author and included in the article where relevant.

2.6. Data Analysis

Starting from an inductive approach, which moves from empirical observation toward the progressive emergence of hypotheses and theoretical frameworks (Giddings 1901), the analysis was conducted in a gradual and iterative manner. The main themes emerged progressively through repeated movement between interviews and observational material,

allowing recurrent patterns, tensions, and differences across field sites to be identified. Particular attention was paid to variations between national contexts and prison settings. The analysis was supported through thematic coding using the software Atlas.ti (Version 26). Interviews were first transcribed using Whisper and subsequently manually revised to ensure transcription accuracy and consistency. Thematic analysis guided the triangulation of interview data, ethnographic observations, and the theoretical frameworks mobilised throughout the research process.

3. Results

Throughout the interviews and observations, four main themes were identified in relation to the ways incarceration destabilises masculine identities within intimate relationships and how men respond to this destabilisation in the context of different penal policies: (Section 3.1) a shared ideal of the couple as a highly fusional relationship, grounded in expectations of constant togetherness and structured by gendered roles and norms; (Section 3.2) the destabilisation of masculine roles through incarceration and the reinforcement of virility as a compensatory strategy within intimate relationships; (Section 3.3) the role of institutional contexts in shaping practices of control; and (Section 3.4) contrasting trajectories in France and Spain regarding the transformation of these dynamics.

3.1. *The Fusion-Oriented Couple: A Shared Ideal and a Gendered Burden*

In both countries, interviews with incarcerated men reveal a strong normative expectation of being in a couple, even among those not currently in a relationship. Many emphasised the importance of finding the “right person” with whom they could share everyday life, reflecting a fusion-oriented conception of the couple, characterised by constant proximity and minimal separation. Most participants described their pre-incarceration relationships in similar terms, with daily life marked by near-continuous presence together, reinforcing the idea that the relationship became part of their identity and rendering separation almost unthinkable:

Really, really, really, it's the centre of my life: the driving force of my life, it's my wife and my kids. They're what keep me going in life. If anything happens to them, well, I'm lost, I'm lost, I'm lost. Like I've always told my wife: “It's not for one year, it's not for ten years. If I marry you, it's forever. Otherwise, we don't get married at all, we stop right away.” (Maxime, 43, incarcerated in France, married, in an ongoing relationship)

In these accounts, conjugal commitment is framed as an absolute and existential promise. This understanding is accompanied by a dichotomous categorisation of women. On the one hand, there are those with whom an enduring relationship is considered possible—namely a serious, long-term bond in which men invest their identity (the “real woman”). On the other hand, other women are perceived as temporary, interchangeable, and incompatible with this model (the “woman of the street”). Jairo, elaborates this distinction:

A real woman, for me, has to have a healthy mindset. A woman has to be a woman in every sense of the word, you know? First of all, for me, she has to be very feminine, okay? Then she has to be respectful, well brought up, that she gives me back what I give her, that we share things, that we have things in common. For me, it doesn't matter if you're beautiful or not, a real woman is a woman with feelings, who knows how to value a man, who respects him, who shows she cares about him, who gives love. And if something is missing, or if you make a mistake, she's there to correct you, like I do for her. A woman, for

me, has to be good, in every sense: healthy, clear-minded, someone I can share a lot of things with. [...] For me, a real woman is a good, homely kind of woman. Not a party woman: sex, alcohol—that's not what I want. I want a good woman, calm, who knows how to do everything at home. Not a woman who claims to be a woman but, deep down, isn't. You see what I mean? (Jairo, 30, incarcerated in Spain, in an ongoing relationship)

Most of the men interviewed, like Jairo, rely on socially structured expectations that define certain behaviours as inherently feminine or masculine. Femininity is therefore governed by strict norms. The "real woman" conforms to domestic, emotional, and relational expectations, whereas the "woman of the street" is defined through deviation from these norms.

This ideal of femininity is inseparable from a complementary model of masculinity. Across both countries, masculinity centres on toughness and the role of the breadwinner. As one inmate in France puts it: "I'm a man, I'm virile, I'm a bad boy, bro."⁴ While stereotypical, this statement highlights how masculinity is primarily defined through virility. Within this framework, being the main economic provider is seen as essential to the proper functioning of the couple:

It's the man who brings the money home, not the woman! I'm not being misogynistic or whatever. Your mother or your grandmother, they stayed with their man their whole life. Why is it that now people get married and the next day they get divorced? (Omid, 33, incarcerated in France, divorced, relationship ended)

Men are no less strict with their own gender roles than with those they assign to women. Representations of the couple are consequently structured around clearly defined and complementary roles. Women are expected to care for the home and family, while men are responsible for 'protection' and economic provision.

3.2. Centrality of the Partner, Destabilisation of Masculinity, and Compensatory Virility

Incarceration disrupts this model of masculinity by cutting men off from the outside world. In this context, the partner becomes a crucial resource, providing both practical support and a connection to the outside:

When you're in prison, honestly, you often need someone else. You have to go through someone, for example, to wash your clothes. Or even tomorrow, if you need to get something from outside, you have to send someone, you can't do it yourself. So, you're always sending someone to do things for you, but nothing is free. Really, nothing is free. When you do that with friends, you pay them; your brothers, you pay them. But generally, women, I swear it's true, women usually don't take money. Even when you want to pay them, they don't want it. I'm not talking about weird girls, I'm talking about women who are solid, they don't take money and they tell you they do it from the heart. (Ali, 28, incarcerated in France, relationship ended but maintains several ongoing relationships without conjugal commitment⁵)

The couple is described as providing access to material resources (money transfers, parcels, administrative support) as well as symbolic resources (recognition, identity continuity, and maintenance of masculine status). At the same time, this reliance produces a form of dependency on the partner, who must take on roles that extend beyond those traditionally assigned to her. This shift has the potential to destabilise the gendered balance within the relationship.

Faced with this destabilisation, men reinforce performances of masculinity within the prison environment. Displays of toughness and emotional control become key strategies for maintaining status and resisting institutional domination:

[Other inmates] come up to you, for example, with their own story in their head, like a whole movie: “Fuck, how many did you kill? You got a cemetery behind you.” I say neither yes nor no. I just let them stay in their nightmare. Keep thinking that, it’s good. Go piss yourself every week when you think about me. That’s how it is, it’s a strategy. Because they often tell me, “Fuck, you’ve got a scary face, a killer’s face, a criminal’s face.” If it’s like that, then you shouldn’t mess with me. (Daniel, 51, incarcerated in France, divorced, relationship ended)

While this posture allows men to navigate prison life, interviews reveal an underlying vulnerability among incarcerated men. As such vulnerability cannot be expressed within the prison setting, it is instead transformed into intensified performances of toughness.

Such behaviour has direct consequences for intimate relationships as a form of “virile anxiety” emerges, driven by the loss of control over the outside world and rooted in the asymmetry between the incarcerated man, who is constrained, and the partner outside, who remains free. Emerging from this tension between masculine social expectations and carceral constraints, virile anxiety translates into attempts by the incarcerated man to monitor and control the partner’s behaviour:

I would call her, of course, and if she didn’t answer or something like that, I’d think, “What is she doing? Where is she?” Thoughts like that. Because in here, you become paranoid quickly. Me, normally, I’ve never been jealous. But when you’re in a position of weakness, and here, it’s clearly a position of inferiority, it’s different. Because the person outside can do whatever they want, but you, in here, you can’t do what you want. For example, if you realise your partner is with someone else, outside you could try to win her back, do things to fix it if you want to. And if you don’t want to fix it, you can meet someone else. But in here, you don’t have that option. It is what it is, you just have to deal with it. So it’s another reality, completely different. (Miguel, 52, semi-liberty in Spain, married, in an ongoing relationship)

The need for control, and to reassert a masculinity undermined by incarceration, is present in both countries at the outset of incarceration. The ways in which this behaviour evolves over the course of imprisonment, however, differ between these contexts.

3.3. France and Spain: Contrasting Public Policy Contexts

Institutional contexts shape the ways in which incarcerated men enact control over their partners. In both countries, phone calls constitute the primary means of maintaining contact, but their regulation differs significantly. In Spain, calls are limited to around five per week, typically lasting five to ten minutes and made from shared spaces; in the prison visited by the researcher, up to 25 calls per month were allowed for each inmate. In France, by contrast, there are no formal limits on the number or duration of calls, and phones were installed directly in cells in the observed facilities. In both countries, however, high costs restrict inmates’ access to phone calls.

Many interviewees reported relying on illicit mobile phones, which enabled more continuous and pervasive forms of contact through messages, social media, photos, and video calls. These technologies allowed some men to monitor their partners’ daily activities more closely and to seek visual or material confirmation of their behaviour beyond what could be conveyed through ordinary phone conversations. Institutional conditions influence access to these devices. In France, incarcerated men spend most of their time in

their cells—sometimes up to 23 h a day—meaning that mobile phones can be used with relative ease. In Spain, inmates spend more time outside the cell, even in closed regimes, limiting their opportunities to use mobile phones. Consequently, continuous monitoring practices appear more widespread in the French context:

I used to see her twice a week but I was on the phone with her 24/7. I was calling her all the time. She'd leave the visit, and 30 min later I'd call her. I'd call her like, "Yeah, what are you doing? Blah blah," "Yeah, I'm cooking something." Sometimes she'd put the phone down and do stuff, and I'd watch her. She'd do like tutorials in front of me, like, "You do this, this, this," like making pasta and all that. Then she'd show me she was getting in the car. Basically, she showed me everything. We were always, always connected. Since she was always there, for me it felt like there wasn't any real distance. (Rayan, 25, incarcerated in France, relationship ended)

While prison authorities in both countries acknowledge that the monitoring of partners living outside prison can become intrusive and controlling, institutional responses to these behaviours differ significantly. In Spain, prison staff actively address these issues and discussed during interviews the forms of support they use to respond to such behaviours:

There are a lot of men who control, and it's not just control. In reality, very few of them feel secure, they have a lot of fears. Their sense of abandonment is amplified and distorted by prison, and that leads us to do educational work to rebuild their confidence, so that in the future they can regain, in a calmer way, what they value positively, without resorting to violent behaviour from in here. The best support they can give themselves is to be at peace with themselves, by maintaining good communication with their family and their partner. It's long-term work, something you have to do every day, supporting them through follow-up interviews. [...] So when they come with a victim narrative, we meet them with patience and try to put things back in perspective, saying: "I understand your distress, because when you suffer in here everything looks dark, but now we're going to move forward step by step, dealing with things one at a time." (Mariona, educator in Spain)

Spanish staff engage in structured interventions aimed at rebuilding self-confidence, reducing controlling behaviours, and developing emotional regulation. These competencies among Spanish staff stem from mandatory training on gender and violence against women.

In contrast, French staff often described a lack of tools and uncertainty in managing such situations:

Samuel: "And if it starts getting too loud and turns into insults and threats... yeah, then we can step in and stop the visit. And of course, if there is beating, we have to."

Yves: "And sometimes it's just the family member who asks to leave, it happened not long ago. She'll ring or knock on the door."

Samuel: "One day, that guy... and his girlfriend..."

Yves: "Oh yeah."

Samuel: "He's a real idiot, that guy. And she was in love, I mean, she was under his control. Like, completely. And sometimes he'd tear into her, insult her... yeah, calling her every name, just because she hadn't brought what he wanted. And sometimes he'd even get violent, the guy. He slapped her. How many times we wanted to stop it, but she'd say, 'No, no, no, it's fine' [he imitates her in a soft voice]. And then we're stuck!"

Yves: “Yeah, you’re stuck, because if you let it go and he ends up attacking her more seriously, then it’s on you, it’s your responsibility. But if you take her out and she doesn’t want to, then you can also get in trouble because she didn’t want to leave. So you call a supervisor to have a witness.” (Yves and Samuel, prison officers in France)

Yves and Samuel appear here to be more concerned with protecting themselves institutionally than with protecting the woman experiencing violence, reflecting the broader ineffectiveness of French penal institutions in responding to controlling behaviour in relationships involving incarcerated persons. Although some staff members expressed a willingness to address violence against women, they often remained unaware of existing support services, both inside and outside prison, for incarcerated men as well as for their partners. Here again, Spain differs from France through the existence of institutional programs specifically targeting incarcerated men.

Several Spanish interviewees, both staff members and incarcerated men, referred to these interventions during the fieldwork. While participation is not mandatory, completing such programs can provide advantages within the prison system, such as access to temporary release permits or transfer to more open detention regimes, which encourages participation. One example, observed during fieldwork, is the *Programa de Tratamiento de Violencia de Género*—a two-month intervention led by a psychologist and a social worker. The program covers different forms of violence—psychological, economic, physical, and sexual—and examines models of masculinity and their costs. In later stages, the programme explores relationship dynamics and the triggers of violent behaviour, helping participants identify and manage such behaviour within themselves, and foster empathy towards victims. The programme concludes with tools to prevent reoffending and promote non-violent conflict resolution.

Finally, the two countries differ in their approach to intimacy. In France, prison policies are primarily framed around the preservation of family ties, and spaces allowing private visits and sexual relations—*Unités de Vie Familiale* (Family Life Units)⁶—are mainly justified as a way to sustain family and conjugal relationships during incarceration rather than as a recognition of prisoners’ sexual intimacy needs. In Spain, by contrast, sexual intimacy is recognised as a right, with at least one *vis-à-vis íntimo* (intimate visits)⁷ permitted per month—reflecting an implicit institutional recognition that couples require intimacy.

3.4. Diverging Responses to the Loss of Control

In Spain, institutional frameworks foster a transformation of attitudes. Men who initially exercise control over their partners often come to question their behaviour after participating in rehabilitative programmes:

I’m not as... I’m not as jealous as before, you know? Prison, the programs, they helped me a lot. Because you start seeing things differently than before, everyone has their own things, their own space, you get it? Things we maybe didn’t have before. Being here... it also makes you see all that. Before, I used to take everything too personally. Now, no. Now I take things differently, there were stupid things that used to affect me a lot. And now I see them... as useless things. Arguing for nothing, basically. (Imrân, 28, incarcerated in Spain, in an ongoing relationship)

This shift is reinforced through peer dynamics, as inmates with more experience in prison, who have ceased controlling behaviour over their partners, pass their perspectives onto others:

You see them bitter, you see them not sleeping, you see them calling on the phone, slamming the booth down. . . And I tell them, “Man, that’s like doing triple time.” I tell them, “You’re in here, focus on your present, on why you’re here, on what you can do now.” And they’re like, “She left me, she’s with someone else!” Okay, but you’re here. What are you going to do? So, focus on yourself, don’t let this be a pause in your life. Prison can also be a time to do things, to move forward. (Nacho, 42, semi-liberty in Spain, in an ongoing relationship)

Even when maintaining traditional gender roles, most of Spain’s inmates articulate a more reflexive understanding of these norms, acknowledging their patriarchal nature and framing them as choices:

I’m one of those who think it’s up to the man to break his back to bring in what’s needed at home. And that the woman, if possible, stays to take care of the kids. It’s not machismo, it’s more a question of efficiency. Because if you neglect the children, if, for example, me and my partner both work, the kids will be a bit left aside. One way or another, they will be. Or they’ll be raised by the school. Me, I want to raise my kids myself, I don’t want it to be the school doing it. So I think one of the two should always be at home. And I believe that physically, biologically, men are different from women. We have, let’s say, a bit more muscle, more strength, it’s the law of nature. It’s not that we’re better or worse, it’s just how it is. And I think women have more patience, they move things forward and they learn earlier. You take a 12-year-old girl, she’ll be much more mature than a boy the same age. So I think we’re different. And if each person feels good in the role they have, whether it’s in a patriarchal system, matriarchal or whatever, then everyone lives the life they want to live. Nowadays, patriarchy gets criticised a lot, but it’s what there is. Me, I don’t force anything on my partners, no, I choose women who already think like me. I’m not going to get into a relationship with a very radical feminist. Why? Because we wouldn’t understand each other. But there are also women who like this role in a relationship. They like being protected by their husband, feeling safe. I don’t know, anyway, that’s my opinion. (Youssef, 33, incarcerated in Spain, in an ongoing relationship)

Like most men interviewed in both countries, Youssef is unable to maintain his role as the breadwinner while in prison⁸. Nevertheless, he continues to assert that economic provision should be a male responsibility and childcare a female one. In Spain, however, this view does not necessarily lead to opposition among inmates towards women working during their incarceration. This contrasts with France, where the reversal of roles—women taking on financial support—is harder for incarcerated men to accept. In France, many incarcerated men refused money transfers from their partner even if they accepted other forms of material support, and some opposed their partner working, despite acknowledging its necessity for the household’s financial stability. This resistance was less pronounced in Spain and did not often constitute a source of tension, even among men who supported traditional gender roles within a household. A key difference lies in how this model is framed: Youssef explicitly acknowledged its patriarchal nature and presented his adherence as a matter of personal choice.

In France, by contrast, such reflexivity was less evident. Masculine identity remains more closely tied to control over the partner, and the loss of the breadwinner role is more difficult to accept. As a result, incarcerated men more frequently attempted to maintain a sense of dominance over the outside world through control over their partner throughout the duration of their incarceration:

Trust is... well, a bit of authority. That's important. You have to lay down the rules, be clear about things. Because otherwise it can go off the rails quickly. Like, with respect, betrayal and all that. And also... you have to put things into perspective. Because we're in a cell, we're in prison, tomorrow... I've seen plenty of guys, and maybe even me sometimes, getting worked up over just a "hello." But it's because your mind in here is restricted, it doesn't see things clearly. It sees things as abnormal that are actually normal. That's why you have to take a step back and think things through. I didn't take everything away from her, but there were certain people and places. For example, I didn't like... to be clear, the nightlife was out of the question. But there were places I allowed her to go, where I knew it was calm, kind of quiet, not too many guys around. I'd call her every hour, yeah, we keep an eye on things. Sometimes even at a restaurant, I'd tell her, "Leave FaceTime on." (Farrukh, 27, incarcerated in France, relationship ended with his ex-wife, new relationship formed with a women inmate⁹)

Many incarcerated men in France acknowledge that their controlling behaviours can become excessive and attribute them to the constraints of imprisonment, yet they continue to justify male authority as necessary. Farrukh's account illustrates the imposition of spatial restriction on his former partner, while other inmates describe limiting their partners' social interactions or regulating aspects of their appearance. In many cases, these forms of control coexist, resulting in the continuous monitoring of women's behaviours. Actions perceived by women as ordinary or acceptable may then be reinterpreted by their partners as transgressive, leading to arguments and, at times, to violence.

Control thus takes different directions among incarcerated populations in each of the two countries: in France, control remains directed toward the partner, whereas in Spain control tends to shift inward, with masculinity increasingly framed as self-control.

4. Discussion

This article contributes to the sociology of incarceration and to the sociology of gender by demonstrating that incarceration destabilises masculine identities within intimate relationships, and that penal policies play a decisive role in shaping men's responses to this disruption.

Drawing on interviews and observations with incarcerated men and prison staff, the findings show that while incarceration initially produces similar reactions across contexts—particularly jealousy and attempts at control—the trajectory of these reactions diverges depending on the institutional frameworks. These findings must be situated within a broader socio-political context in which questions of gender norms and violence against women have become increasingly polarised. As emphasised by the [Haut Conseil à l'Égalité \(2025\)](#), contemporary public debates (across media, political arenas, and online spaces) are marked by growing tensions between, on the one hand, increased recognition of the systemic nature of sexism and, on the other, resistance to male introspection and to the questioning of established gender norms. In this context, the prison setting, which functions as a magnifying lens of broader social dynamics ([Rostaing 1997](#)), constitutes a particularly revealing site for examining how such tensions are reconfigured under conditions of institutional constraint and enforced dependency on outside partners.

First, the conjugal model identified in both countries under study, France and Spain, corresponds to a highly fusional form of intimate relationship that closely resembles the ideal type of "shared self-realisation" (*se réaliser ensemble*) proposed by [Santelli \(2018\)](#). In this model, the couple is conceived as a space of comprehensive security, encompassing affective, material, financial, and moral dimensions, within a durable and strongly institutionalised commitment tied to a family project, and structured by a markedly gendered division

of roles. The findings show that men tend to distinguish between a “real” woman, with whom this idealised couple can be realised, and women perceived as failing to conform to prescribed gender norms and therefore as unsuitable partners. This distinction is closely intertwined with their own self-understanding as men, grounded in expectations of virility and in the role of the economic provider. In this respect, the findings support previous research on gendered conjugal norms (Déchaux and Le Pape 2021; Santelli 2025) and on the reactivation and intensification of virility under conditions of incarceration (Chauvenet et al. 2008; Sloan 2016), while bringing these strands together by highlighting their combined effects on intimate relationships.

While hegemonic masculinity remains an aspirational model that few men fully embody, many nevertheless endorse its central norms and contribute to its reproduction (Maguire 2021). The men interviewed in this study illustrate this dynamic. They draw on the ideals of hegemonic masculinity to define and evaluate themselves, yet their social position complicates access to the symbolic and material advantages associated with this model. Most come from working-class backgrounds, have limited educational capital, and are often racialised (INSEE 2002). As a result, they are better understood as occupying a position of “marginalised masculinity” (Connell 1993), in which experiences of social, racial, and institutional domination can lead some men to reinvest in and amplify traits associated with hegemonic masculinity in an attempt to reclaim legitimacy and social value. Incarceration intensifies this marginalisation by undermining men’s capacity to perform what they define as masculine roles, particularly those of virility and economic provision, as they are removed from the outside world and become increasingly dependent on their partners. This reconfiguration of dependency creates a tension between persistent gender expectations and lived constraints.

For men whose social position places them at a distance from the hegemonic ideal, this often results in an overinvestment in displays of masculinity as a way of compensating for perceived masculine deficiencies (Maguire 2021). Prison further amplifies this dynamic by rewarding hypermasculine performances with status and recognition among inmates (Michalski 2015). This is expressed both in interactions with other male inmates, where displays of strength and toughness are valorised (Sloan 2016), and, as the findings suggest, in efforts to maintain a position of dominance within intimate relationships. In the free world, men’s relative autonomy and freedom of action within the household grant them a form of structural power over their partners (Bell Hooks 2004), a power that, despite strengthened public policies addressing violence against women (Cartier et al. 2024), remains deeply embedded in gender relations. The loss of this engagement with the outside world, however, produces emotional vulnerability among incarcerated men. Intensified by distance and uncertainty, this vulnerability can undermine men’s sense of autonomy and respectability, transforming attachment into frustration, anger, and jealousy (Borochowitz and Eisikovits 2002). In both countries, many incarcerated men experience a form of “virile anxiety” as imprisonment undermines their ability to perform the authority, strength, and control associated with socially valued forms of masculinity (Rivoal 2017). In response, many men attempt to reclaim these attributes through monitoring and control of their partners’ lives on the outside following the onset of incarceration.

Jealousy, understood as an affective disturbance arising when the perceived natural order of the relationship is disrupted (Raoult 2017), constitutes a central element in incarcerated men’s narratives. It is expressed through a constant reinterpretation of their partners’ actions, in which delayed responses or limited contact may be read as signs of infidelity. Such suspicions do not necessarily rely on concrete evidence but are rooted in broader social representations and expectations surrounding intimate relationships (Bajos et al. 2008), which the prison context tends to destabilise, thereby intensifying uncertainty

over whether partners living outside prison continue to conform to these expectations. Emotional compression within prison further exacerbates this uncertainty, as prisoners carry a substantial emotional burden with limited opportunities to process feelings related to their lives outside prison (Crewe et al. 2017). As a result, feelings of jealousy may become particularly difficult to navigate. Existing studies indicate that jealousy, grounded in a logic of exclusive possession, constitute a central motive in cases of violence against women (Walker 1979; Kelly and Westmarland 2016; Stark and Hester 2019). A key question, therefore, is under what conditions this jealousy, emerging from the destabilisation of masculine identity, translates into violence against intimate partners.

The findings suggest that this transformation is not systematic and varies according to the penal context. In both France and Spain, men refer to their possession of illicit mobile phones as a means of maintaining a form of influence over their partners on the outside. This use can be understood as a strategy of circumvention and a way of regaining a degree of agency over one's condition (Khosrokhavar 2016), rather than simply as a moral transgression. Access to such devices, as well as to official telephone booths, is more restricted in Spain than in France, due both to reduced time spent in cells, which limits opportunities to use illicit phones, and to stricter regulations governing the number of authorised calls through official telephone services. Beyond these differences, access to such devices exists in both contexts but their use evolves differently over time.

In France, the evolution of some incarcerated men's attitudes and behaviours toward their partners can be interpreted through the lens of coercive control. This refers to a pattern of abusive behaviours aimed at dominating and regulating a partner through the accumulation of practices such as surveillance, isolation, intimidation, and, at times, physical violence (Stark 2007). Deprived of direct access to the outside world, incarcerated men in France articulate behaviours towards their partners that mirror this form of control, as they seek to maintain a sense of power by limiting their partners' autonomy. This is particularly visible in attempts to regulate women's activities, including employment, which may be framed by male partners as a threat to the family sphere (Haicault 1984). Such dynamics also extend to broader restrictions on women's social lives and on their capacity to "inhabit" space freely, as male partners define the boundaries of what is considered acceptable (San Martin 2019). These practices can contribute to women's isolation from peers and support networks, which constitutes a central dimension of coercive control (Gruev-Vintila 2023). Over time, these mechanisms may lead women to internalise control, undermining their own autonomy and their capacity to interpret their own experiences. This process can be defined as "gaslighting," which demonstrates how coercive control operates not only through external constraints but also through forms of internal cognitive and emotional destabilisation (Sweet 2019). As Sweet (2019) shows, these dynamics intensify when perpetrators mobilise structural inequalities related to gender, race and class against their partners. This intersectional dimension is consistent with the findings, as it is particularly salient in the population studied, where both incarcerated men and their partners often experience multiple and overlapping forms of inequality, thereby reinforcing women's vulnerability to coercive control and facilitating the entrenchment of these controlling dynamics within the relationship.

From this perspective, the more limited and uneven institutional responses to coercive and violent behaviours toward women within the French prison system are particularly significant. Although accountability programmes for perpetrators convicted of violence against women do exist and may be offered prior to sentencing, integrated into a sentence, or used as an alternative to prosecution, their implementation remains inconsistent (Trachman and Amado 2024). These programmes are generally led by probation officers (CPIP), sometimes in collaboration with psychologists, but they are neither systematic nor

universally applied. In practice, difficult working conditions and the growing volume of cases mean that these interventions are often left to the individual discretion of probation officers (CPIP), resulting in uneven and inconsistent practices, particularly in the absence of a centralised legal framework (Trachman 2025). More broadly, issues of gender and sexuality are not addressed within a coherent policy framework and remain weakly integrated into staff training (Cardi et al. 2024). These findings highlight the need for systematic institutional intervention around gender, sexuality, and violence against women within French prisons if the institution is not to contribute to the reproduction of violence against women and the broader patriarchal order that sustains it.

In contrast, a different pattern can be observed in Spain, where institutional responses to violence against women are more developed, and deeply integrated into the prison system. The growing number of men incarcerated for violence against women, now one of the leading causes of male imprisonment in Spain (Ministerio del Interior 2009), has prompted the development of targeted interventions within the prison system, including mandatory staff training on gender issues. For example, in Catalonia, a collaborative initiative among social educators from different prisons led to the development of a pedagogical tool, the *Guia d'educació afectivosexual* (affective and sexual education guide). This guide supports professionals in addressing gender-related issues with incarcerated individuals, including the deconstruction of gender stereotypes, reflections on the specificities and social norms associated with male and female sexuality, and broader cultural expectations surrounding gender relations (Comunitat Educadors Socials de Centres Penitenciaris 2009). Spain has also implemented rehabilitation programs for perpetrators that combine cognitive-behavioural approaches with educational support. The *Programa de Control de la Agresión Sexual* (Sexual Aggression Control Program) introduced in 1998, for instance, offers a multidisciplinary two-year intervention for men convicted of sexual violence (García López 2019). More broadly, the adoption in 2008 of the *Programa de Acciones de Igualdad entre Mujeres y Hombres en el Ámbito Penitenciario* (Program for Equality Actions between Women and Men in the Prison System) led to prison institutions adopting more extensive gender equality policies (Ballesteros-Pena et al. 2023). Composed of more than 120 measures, this programme aimed to address discrimination against women prisoners while promoting the reintegration of both men and women, with particular attention given to violence against women and the broader systems that sustain it (Ballesteros Pena 2017). By making domestic violence an explicit object of institutional intervention rather than a private matter between intimate partners, these programmes encourage men to recognise and reflect upon behaviours that often remain normalised or invisible. In this way, they seek to challenge the silence that contributes to the misrecognition of violence (Di Marco and Evans 2025). However, these advances should not be overstated. Following the discontinuation of the initial equality program in 2011, many measures were weakened or only partially maintained, and, despite the broader strengthening of equality policies in Spain, their impact within the prison system has remained comparatively limited (Ballesteros Pena 2017). Nevertheless, these initiatives have contributed to embedding gender issues within institutional practices to a greater extent than in France.

Importantly, the findings suggest that gender-focused prison policies are associated with shifts in men's attitudes towards their partners during incarceration. While participation in such programs may also function as a mechanism of institutional selection between "cooperative" and "non-cooperative" inmates (Icard 2020), men incarcerated in Spain frequently describe a gradual abandonment of attempts to control their partners, a transformation they themselves associate directly with these interventions. These programmes, together with everyday interactions among prisoners, reshape what is considered legitimate masculine behaviour within the prison social world. Whereas status among inmates is often associated with the capacity to use violence and assert dominance (Michalski 2015),

participants interviewed in Spain described a context in which attempts to control one's partner were increasingly questioned by fellow prisoners as futile and counterproductive. Rather than encouraging the surveillance of partners on the outside, these peer interactions encouraged incarcerated men to focus on their own emotions, behaviours, and experiences of imprisonment. Consequently, participants' narratives shifted away from monitoring their partners and towards reflecting on their own experiences of incarceration and changes in how they understood themselves and their relationships. This redefinition of masculinity does not reject the value placed on strength and courage (Gazalé 2017) but rather relocates it. Strength becomes associated less with controlling others and more with self-mastery and emotional regulation. From this perspective, jealousy and the forms of control derived from it are no longer valorised but instead reframed as obstacles to masculine strength. This shift can be interpreted as a partial move away from the conjugal ideal of "shared self-realisation" (Santelli 2018) towards a conception of the couple in which partners are regarded as autonomous individuals rather than as a fused unit. In this sense, Spain's efforts to incorporate measures addressing violence against women into institutional practices appear to have tangible effects on reducing controlling behaviour within incarcerated men's intimate relationships. In line with Kelly's (2019) conceptualisation of violence against women as part of a continuum of socially tolerated forms of male aggression, rather than as isolated or pathological acts, Spain's institutional approaches frame such behaviours as structural and embedded within broader gender relations and patriarchal norms. By situating individual behaviours within a broader structural framework, these policies encourage reflexivity and contribute to a gradual reconfiguration of conjugal dynamics during incarceration, particularly through the weakening of control-oriented behaviours.

Finally, in a context marked by significant political transformations and renewed tensions around democratic frameworks in Europe (Crignon 2024), this comparative research offers valuable insights into how institutional practices addressing gender relations and violence against women are progressively being integrated into penal institutions. The comparison between France and Spain illustrates how different penal policy approaches can shape incarcerated men's responses to the destabilisation of masculine identities in distinct ways, either contributing to the reproduction of coercive control or encouraging greater reflexivity regarding violence against women. These findings are consistent with research suggesting that prison interventions can help foster healthier forms of masculinity by creating opportunities for men to critically reflect on gender norms (Nixon 2023). They also support recent calls for a better understanding of coercive control as a basis for designing effective prevention policies and interventions targeting men (Molnar and Aebi 2024; Di Marco and Evans 2025). While remaining attentive to national specificities, a stronger European commitment to addressing violence against women within prison systems could therefore strengthen prevention and intervention efforts. Beyond these policy implications, the comparison challenges representations of incarcerated men as inherently hypermasculine or intrinsically prone to violence. Such representations typically rely on racialised and class-based understandings of masculinity that portray certain groups of men as less civilised and therefore more naturally violent or sexually threatening (Actis 2024). Instead, the comparison demonstrates that masculinities are shaped by institutional contexts and public policies. As Yuchen (2020) argues, hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed or substantive form of masculinity but a structural position whose defining characteristics can vary across gender regimes, suggesting that what counts as hegemonic masculinity is not immutable. The comparison therefore demonstrates the importance of examining which forms of masculinity are elevated to hegemonic status and whether they reproduce or undermine patriarchal relations.

Moreover, this research would benefit from further development through interdisciplinary and multi-sited approaches across these existing, and additional, European

countries to deepen the strength of these comparisons and critically assess existing models, including the Spanish one. It would also make it possible to examine how gender regimes are shaped through interactions between national and transnational social and political processes, as global and regional gender orders mutually influence one another and contribute to the production and circulation of models of masculinities (Connell and Messerschmidt 2015). Future research would also benefit from more systematically incorporating the perspectives of female partners. Although this study highlights transformations in men's attitudes, it also points to shifting roles among women, who often assume new responsibilities during incarceration. As relatives of incarcerated individuals, they are themselves deeply affected by imprisonment despite not being detained and therefore constitute a secondary population impacted by the prison system (Touraut 2012). This raises the question of whether the increased dependence of incarcerated men on their partners leads to a reconfiguration of gendered inequalities, both material and symbolic, and whether these asymmetries persist in different forms. Finally, longitudinal research following both partners beyond release would be particularly valuable for assessing whether these reconfigurations endure once men return to the relationship. Such research would respond to a growing call within the sociology of incarceration for comparative and longitudinal analyses at an international scale (Mohammed 2012) and could shed light on whether the shifts in gender roles observed during incarceration lead to lasting transformations or to a return to more traditional arrangements.

5. Conclusions

Across France and Spain, intimate relationships involving incarcerated men are structured by deeply rooted gender norms and a fusional ideal. The incarceration of men destabilises this model by undermining masculinities built on virility and the role of provider. While in both contexts men initially respond to this loss by attempting to control their partners, institutional frameworks shape the trajectory of these reactions.

In France, incarceration often produces a wounded masculinity, with some men reacting through coercive control and violence against their partners. This dynamic can be understood as a reassertion of power in a context marked by structural marginalisation. Although discourses and initiatives addressing violence against women exist, they remain weakly institutionalised and unevenly implemented. In Spain, by contrast, more structured and institutionalised policies around gender and violence against women appear to foster a partial reconfiguration of masculine norms, encouraging a shift from control over partners toward self-control and emotional reflexivity.

These findings highlight that prison policies are not neutral but actively shape the forms that masculinity and intimate relationships can take under the conditions of incarceration. They can reorient these transformations towards or away from violence, influencing whether insecurity is expressed through control or reworked into forms of respect and care. Such transformations, however, require sustained and structured interventions, as they do not occur spontaneously. In this regard, prisons have the potential to become a site for long-term work on challenging gender norms and enacting the prevention of violence against women, provided that coherent and systematic policies are effectively implemented.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: Concerning the clarification related to ethics committee approval, the situation reflects the French institutional framework for qualitative sociological research. According to Article L1121-1 of the French Public Health Code (Loi Jardé), mandatory CPP/IRB approval concerns research involving human participants conducted with a view to the development of biological or medical knowledge. The present study consisted of non-interventional qualitative socio-

logical research based on ethnographic observation and semi-structured interviews conducted within a doctoral framework in sociology. At the time the research was conducted, no mandatory IRB/CPP approval procedure existed at the host institution for this type of qualitative social science research.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The datasets presented in this article are not publicly available because they contain qualitative interview transcripts and field notes from a vulnerable population. Although all data were anonymised, the detailed nature of the narratives means that participants could potentially be re-identified. In accordance with the informed consent provided by participants, the ethical commitments of the study, and the requirements of the General Data Protection Regulation (European Parliament and the Council of European Union 2016), the full dataset cannot be shared publicly. Selected anonymised excerpts, translated into English by the author, are included in the article where relevant. Requests for access to anonymised data may be directed to the corresponding author and will be considered on a case-by-case basis, subject to ethical and legal restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

- ¹ In Spain, the presence of a semi-liberty unit within the prison where the fieldwork was conducted made it possible to interview individuals who remained under custodial supervision while leaving the prison daily for work or spending weekends with their partners. These participants are considered incarcerated individuals because they were recruited and interviewed within the prison institution, although their semi-liberty status is specified in the below interview excerpts. Including these participants provides insight into individuals at more advanced stages of their prison sentence. Similar interviews could not be conducted in France, as the prisons included in the research did not include semi-liberty units.
- ² In this article, the term “prison staff” refers to different professional roles within the French and Spanish prison systems. In both countries, it includes prison officers responsible for surveillance. However, reintegration functions differ. In France, they are carried out by *conseiller·ère·s pénitentiaires d’insertion et de probation* (prison integration and probation officers, CPIP), whereas in Spain they are divided between *educadores/educadoras* (educators) and *trabajadores/trabajadoras sociales* (social workers) (Ministerio de Justicia e Interior 1996; Herzog-Evans 2019).
- ³ In France, the fieldwork was conducted in a *maison d’arrêt*, which primarily houses pre-trial detainees and individuals serving short sentences, and in a *centre de détention*, which accommodates sentenced individuals serving longer terms. In Spain, the fieldwork’s prison includes the three classification regimes: first degree (*primer grado*), second degree (*segundo grado*), and third degree (*tercer grado*), corresponding to different levels of security and progression within the sentence.
- ⁴ Quotation noted in the researcher’s fieldnotes during participant observation in a prison in France, following an informal conversation involving an incarcerated man, a prison officer, and two other incarcerated men.
- ⁵ “Relationships without conjugal commitment” correspond to what Bergström (2025) describes as “ongoing relationships”: ties that are more regular than casual one-night encounters, yet less invested and durable than a conjugal relationship, in which romantic feelings remain uncommon without being entirely absent. These relationships may also coexist with a conjugal relationship and therefore fall within what Garcia (2021) refers to as “extra conjugal” relationships.
- ⁶ Family Life Units (*Unités de Vie Familiale*) allow incarcerated individuals in France to spend between 6 and 72 h with relatives in furnished apartments within prisons and without surveillance. Access is reserved for sentenced prisoners and pre-trial detainees with judicial authorization. However, because Family Life Units are mainly located in long-term prison facilities for sentenced individuals, they are not accessible in practice to all prisoners.
- ⁷ Intimate visits in Spain (*Vis-à-vis íntimos*) are a right for all prisoners and allow unsupervised visits lasting one to three hours in a private room within the prison with an intimate partner once or twice a month.
- ⁸ A minority of men report being able to maintain the breadwinner role through savings from prior illegalisms or by continuing illicit activities from within prison, for instance via mobile phones.
- ⁹ In this excerpt, Farrukh is referring to his ex-wife.

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