



Living Behind Symbolic and Concrete Barriers of Total Institutions: Reflections on the Transition between Domestic Symbolic Patriarchal Imprisonment and Co-Governed, State-Sponsored Incarceration in Perú

Lucia Bracco Bruce

University of Warwick, United Kingdom; Research Group of Forensic and Penitentiary Psychology, Pontifical Catholic University of Peru (PUCP), Peru

Abstract

This article seeks to analyse the paradox of freedom and imprisonment, reflecting on the connections between and nuances of intimate partner violence and abuse (IPVA) and women's imprisonment in the Global South, particularly in Perú. The story follows Maria, a woman serving a 14-year sentence for the homicide of her husband, an act she committed after experiencing 20 years of psychological and physical abuse. I have chosen to focus on her ambivalence towards her experience of IPVA, using Goffman's (1961) concept of the 'total institution'; I suggest that Maria was living under a patriarchal and symbolic total institution, a prison-like home (Avni 1991). Following this, while imprisoned for the homicide of her husband, Maria was physically incapacitated in a co-governed, patriarchal, nation-state prison. Nevertheless, simultaneously, in this custodial setting, she found a semi-autonomous path to reinforce her sense of agency and to construct interpersonal relationships that have enabled her to question the preceding patriarchal norms.

Keywords

Intimate partner violence; homicide; gender-based violence; Southern criminology; Global South; Perú.

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Introduction

In feminist criminology, the experiences of intimate partner violence and abuse (IPVA) and imprisonment are too often intimately connected (Almeda and Di Nella, 2017; Antony, 2007; Lagarde, 1990; WOLA, 2016). In this article, I seek to reflect on how the experiences of women who live in a situation of IPVA relate to the experience of imprisonment in a women's prison in the Global South, particularly in Perú, and on how patriarchy and women's agencies are experienced by women in two heteronormative and traditional institutions: the traditional family and the prison. Following Goffman's (1961) concept, prisons have been defined as 'total institutions'—environments in which subjects are confined and incarcerated against their will, subjected to daily routine and constant degradation, and have their identities reconfigured. I propose that this concept allows us to reflect on women's lives before and during imprisonment in the Global South.

In November 2009, after 20 years of psychological and physical violence, Maria, a 47-year-old woman with two sons, killed her husband. The next day, she turned herself in to the authorities. In 2018—the year I met her—Maria was a prisoner at the largest women's prison in Lima, Perú, commonly known as Santa Mónica. I was conducting ethnographic research and she was the Church coordinator of the Catholic chaplaincy. In January 2018, Maria was 55 years old and had been imprisoned for more than eight years of her 14-year sentence. She was a calm and empathetic woman, always willing to help both her peers and myself during my research. The other prisoners looked up to her as a role model, a wise woman able to find peace with herself while imprisoned.

In this article, I problematise Goffman's (1961) category of 'total institution' through the story of Maria. I argue that it is useful to understand Maria's experience of living in a situation of IPVA; however, it may not be entirely useful when trying to understand her experience of imprisonment. Before imprisonment, Maria was not physically incarcerated; however, the concept of incarceration may be used as a metaphor for understanding the symbolic, patriarchal prison Maria experienced while being 'free'. Then, while imprisoned for the homicide of her husband, Maria was incarcerated in what Goffman (1961) would traditionally qualify as a 'total institution'. Nonetheless, Maria was sent to Santa Mónica, a co-governed prison characterised as being a porous and permeable negotiatory space between prison staff and prisoners. Thus, although Maria was physically incapacitated and experienced geographical restrictions on her mobility, she found a semi-autonomous path that provided her with some power within prison; she was able to fortify her agency and build interpersonal relationships that enabled her to start questioning the patriarchal barriers that had previously imprisoned her, subjectively. Consequently—and paradoxically—inside prison, Maria found a sense of freedom and greater autonomy, finding ownership of herself.

This paper starts by providing a brief context of gender violence in Perú and a theoretical perspective on women who have experienced IPVA and have killed someone, in addition to the concept of the 'total institution'. It then discusses the methodology. Finally, through deep engagement with Maria's narratives, I focus on the analysis of her experiences inside her house with her husband and two sons and her subsequent experiences in Santa Mónica. Through analysing Maria's story, I seek to contribute to reflections on the intersection of punishment and gender in Perú and, more broadly, in the Global South, and the structural patterns of patriarchy that mould women's lives.

Theoretical Approach to Battered Women Who Kill

Battered Women Who Kill in Perú and Legal Repercussions

In Perú, 62.2 per cent of women have declared that they have suffered some type of violence perpetrated by their husbands or partners (Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática [INEI] 2017). Between January and February 2020, the Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Population (Ministerio de la Mujer y Poblaciones Vulnerables [MIMP] 2020) reported 32 cases of femicide and 120 femicide attempts. Most

victims of femicide are killed by their current or former male partner (MIMP 2019, 2020). During social distancing for coronavirus between March and May 2020, the motto *#quedateencasa* (*#stayhome*) was linked to security and the possibility of saving your life and the lives of others. In March 2020, during the first two weeks of the emergency decree in Perú, it was formally notified that one femicide took place; 5,418 calls were made by women reporting physical aggression; there were 43 cases of sexual aggression; and 25 women (with their children) were relocated to refuge houses (Estudio para la defensa de los Derechos de la Mujer 2020).¹

In September 2018, only 210 men were sent to jail for femicide cases in Perú; the majority will be released from prison in under 15 years. In fact, of the femicides and attempted femicides committed in 2019, 78 perpetrators are waiting trial inside a prison and only two had formal convictions, both of these for a maximum of 30 years (Luján 2020). There are no official statistics regarding women who have killed their male partners. However, such cases are much less common, both in Perú and globally (Heise and García-Moreno 2002; Hernández et al. 2018). Feminist research in different global settings has demonstrated that, while the men who perpetrate such violence reportedly do so due to a need for control and dominance, the women who kill their violent partners reportedly act from fear, frustration and desperation (Morrissey 2003; Seal 2010).

Women who have been exposed to IPVA are often defined as 'battered women' (Walker 1990). Seal (2010) analysed representations of battered women who kill their partners to demonstrate the inequities and inadequacies of criminal justice systems in handling such cases. As Morrissey (2003) has suggested, battered women who kill are often charged with murder and, in a legal context, usually employ defence or self-defence to reduce charges. As the Organization of American States (Organización de Estados Americanos [OEA] 2018) has stated, one key element required to claim self-defence is either the imminence of the threat or the actuality of the act of defence. In other words, it must be evident that the aggression was temporally close enough to determine that the homicide was committed in defence of the woman's life. By including a gender perspective, it becomes necessary to emphasise that acts of IPVA are rarely isolated, but must be considered as a systematic situation that hinders fundamental human rights such as freedom, security and physical and psychic integrity (Nicolson 2019; OEA 2018).

Although there is no consensus about whether sex is a differential variable in sentencing (Embry and Lyons 2012), evidence suggests that women who kill are positioned as distant from hegemonic gender stereotypes and are treated more harshly in courts than men who kill their wives (Morrissey 2003). As Seal (2010) has explained, these women raise questions about the alleged masculine/feminine gender binary by breaking the norms of traditional femininity, such as nurturance, gentleness and social conformity. Consequently, these women are stereotypically defined as 'mad' or as 'monsters' (Morrissey 2003; Seal 2010). Similarly, when women's actions can undoubtedly be circumscribed within a situation of IPVA, they are defined as insane or as experiencing mental health issues. Both ideas are problematic (Morrissey 2003; Seal 2010) because 'order is restored within the dominant, hegemonic world' (Morrissey 2003: 171). In other words, women who kill are positioned as pathological or as distanced from hegemonic femininity.

Goffman's Total Institution, Battered Women and Prisons in the Global South

Erving Goffman (1961) introduced the concept of the 'total institution' to refer to confinement institutions in which there is a bureaucratic organisation that manages subjects' personal needs for physical rest, labour and recreation with the rational aim of fulfilling the formal purposes of the institutions. Once in confinement, the subjects share an imposed structured routine and their social interactions are systematically controlled by a formal administration.

Goffman differentiates five types of total institutions: (a) for harmless people who cannot take care of themselves and are not a threat to the community (e.g., orphanages); (b) for people who cannot care for

themselves but are a threat to the community (e.g., mental hospitals); (c) for the treatment of people who are perceived as dangerous with the purpose of protecting society (e.g., prisons); (d) with an aim to pursue some task or specific purpose (e.g., boarding schools); and (e) for people who voluntarily retreat from society (e.g., monasteries).

A fundamental characteristic of total institutions is the basic split between the large group of people who live in them and have restricted contact with the world outside (the inmates) and the small group who supervise them (the staff), who are often integrated into the outside world. There is a binary and hierarchical relationship between both groups, where staff feel superior and righteous and inmates tend to feel inferior, weak and guilty. Additionally, when a person enters an institution, the self is systematically mortified. The person experiences abasements, degradations and humiliations that lead to progressive and psychic transformations of what he or she believes about him or herself.

The connection between total institutions and battered women had been discussed by Avni (1991), who conducted research in Israel about the lived experiences of 35 battered women who were living in a shelter. The author applied Goffman's concept and suggested that battered women lived in 'prison-like' (1991: 137) homes that resembled the total institution. Avni (1991) specified various similarities between such homes and a total institution. In both situations, in a total institution and in a prison-like home, women experience the imposition of rules, confinement to a unique place, limited contact with family and friends, a constant exposure to surveillance and the mortification of the self. Moreover, she suggested that battered women had more totalitarian experiences because the ratio of surveillance is one-to-one and the private nature of home interfere in the protection from extreme violence from outsiders.

In the case where a battered woman kills her aggressor and it is sentenced for that crime, she will enter a prison, traditionally defined by Goffman (1961) as a total institution. However, recent studies in the Global South have started to question this fixed definition of prisons as enclosed environments, instead seeing them as porous, permeable and negotiatory spaces between prison staff and prisoners. This scholarship has identified macro-political dynamics of self- and co-governance and determined that the management of these prisons requires the active participation of prisoners and mostly relies on their collective organisation into an informal order (see e.g., Antillano 2017; Carter 2014; Cerbini 2017; Darke 2019; Veeken 2000).

Following these studies, and as result of my ethnographic research in Perú, I (Bracco 2020) also propose that Santa Mónica's macro-political dimension operates through co-governance, where there is a formal-legal order (related to the nation-state institution) that intermingles with an informal-legitimised one (associated with an internal collective organisation of order and conviviality that follows a customary law). The intertwining of these orders transforms the top-down power relationships, making the prison a site of dynamic and constant negotiations.

Additionally, it is necessary to include the intersection of a third order in prison: the Catholic Church. Perú is a secular nation; however, Catholicism provides the collective national identity and moral values and the Catholic Church has a privileged relationship with the state (Flores 2016). In Santa Mónica, the Catholic Church is not formally connected to the prison. However, it operates as a political-ecclesiastical institution inside the prison and constitutes a valued social institution for the authorities, prison staff and prisoners. In an institution that operates through co-governance, religion is undeniably used as a disciplinary tool for prisoners; however, becoming a member of the Catholic group in Santa Mónica simultaneously provides some benefits that allow prisoners to find agency. This agency is not found via engagement with religious discourses; rather, becoming involved in the Catholic group is a liberating path that enables prisoners to engage in semi-autonomous actions within the public space of prison. It allows them to construct intersubjective, caring relationships that aids in resisting imprisonment and enable women to reaffirm themselves.

Methodology

Santa Mónica Prison

When I conducted my fieldwork in 2018, there were 707 prisoners (Instituto Nacional Penitenciario [INPE] 2018). The majority of women in Santa Mónica are young prisoners (558 are between the ages of 20 and 49), who were underemployed or unemployed before imprisonment. A significant proportion of the prisoners are mothers and the main or sole responsible adult that supports their children. Of the 707 prisoners, 411 have been sentenced and 296 are on remand, and more than 50 per cent are imprisoned for drug-related crimes (INEI 2016; INPE 2018). There are 20–25 security staff, depending on the day of the week. The treatment area is understaffed; for example, there are just seven psychologists that share the task of prisoners' evaluation, classification and the alleged resocialisation process of the entire penitentiary population.

My Encounter with Maria

I was able to get to know Maria during a six-month ethnographic study in Santa Mónica prison between December 2017 and May 2018. I conducted this ethnography as part of my doctoral research and Maria was an active participant in this study. I visited Santa Mónica prison four days per week and stayed for four to five hours each day. The ethnography included a participatory observation, individual reflective discussions and group reflective discussions with a number of prisoners. The analysis elaborated in this paper focuses on what I have categorised as individual reflective discussions (IRDs). IRDs differ from structured or semi-structured interviews because participants can introduce new themes, reflections or perspectives during the process (Montero 2006). The IRD with Maria comprised four sessions of approximately one hour each. We met once a week for four weeks on the second floor of the chaplaincy of Santa Mónica, a place that offered us sufficient privacy to discuss complex topics. Maria used to bring coffee to share, we sat face to face and the meetings were amicable and dialogical. The IRDs did not have a fixed structure; conversely, they sought to create an open dialogue in which Maria could narrate her story before and during imprisonment and how she envisioned herself in the future.

Maria is a *mestiza* woman of middle to lower economic status (before imprisonment) and possesses a technical education degree. Although Maria has been imprisoned for eight years and has a sentence of 14 years, she maintains a good relationship with her two sons, Piero and Alfredo, who were both young adults when I met her. As previously mentioned, Maria was the Catholic Church coordinator in Santa Mónica. Her responsibilities included working in coordination with the religious congregation that works inside the prison, inviting new members, helping to organise the Sunday service, coordinating religious events with authorities and other prisoners in Santa Mónica and guarding the chaplaincy key.

I have chosen Maria's story as a case study for reflection on the paradox of women's imprisonment in Perú because, much like the majority of women prisoners in Santa Mónica, she is a survivor of IPVA and has become a legitimate role model in the prison.

Ethics

Maria signed an informed consent form to voluntarily participate in the IRD and to approve the audio recording of our dialogues. I transcribed the audio myself and am the only one with access to the transcriptions. I have changed her name and the names of her husband and two sons. In the broader context, I believe that all research processes, particularly those held in complex spaces such as penal institutions, are emotional processes. Beyond methodological techniques, the production of knowledge is only possible through the construction of trusting relationships with participants and engagement with conscious feelings such as empathy and vulnerability (García 2019). These acts include respecting participants' psychic processes and their timeframes to engage in trustful relationships with them.

Given this perspective, as a researcher, I must constantly engage in a process of reflexivity to be aware of the power relationship between myself and the participant. My position, as a non-imprisoned white woman, from a middle-upper class background and pursuing a doctoral degree at an international university, may have established symbolic and concrete barriers between Maria and myself, particularly in such an unequal country as Perú and in a setting such as prison. To address these issues, I engaged in many informal conversations with Maria before inviting her to participate in the IRD, to construct a more transparent relationship in which we both trusted each other.

The Transition from a Symbolic to a Concrete Prison

I argue that incarcerated women with lived experiences of IPVA have metaphorically lived in a symbolic and patriarchal 'total institution'; once imprisoned in a literal 'total institution' (according to Goffman), the fences become real but there arises the possibility of regaining a sense of freedom and increased autonomy. Thus, these women perceive freedom and imprisonment in a paradoxical manner. To make this argument, I present an analysis of Maria's narratives of her experience in her house with her husband and two sons and her experience in Santa Mónica prison.

Maria's First Prison: Her House as a Symbolic 'Total Institution'

Maria met Carlos when she was 26 and he was 23 years old. They were married after four months; although it seemed like a rushed decision at the time, Maria recalls that he was a mature man for his age, having taken on the role of his parent after his father died and looking after his mother and two younger brothers. Maria recalls that Carlos was physically handsome; however, overall, she describes him as a 'natural' provider whom she admired and felt safe and protected by.

After their wedding, they moved in with her mother-in-law and, shortly after, into their new house. At the beginning of her marriage, Maria never expected to experience a story of violence. The first violent episode occurred seven or eight months later. As she remembers:

He thought he lost his wallet, and was preoccupied with that, and then he fell asleep. After a couple of hours, his cousin knocked on our door and told me he found the wallet in the garage. I wanted to give him the good news, so I shake him to wake him up. When he opened his eyes, he slapped me on the face and told me: never wake me up. I was in shock.

In Maria's description of Carlos, it is possible to observe the first signs of a hierarchical relationship between them. This is much like the binary hierarchical relationship between staff and inmates, as described by Goffman (1961). However, in this case, the hierarchical relationship follows the structure of hegemonic patriarchal relationships. The acknowledgement of this structural dimension is vital for understanding the construction of a total institution, a 'prison-like' home (Avni 1991: 137). Haywood et al. (2018), who reformulated Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity, suggested that the concept is mostly used to analyse how patriarchy is maintained, safeguarded and upheld by men. Hence, this maintenance is observed in how Carlos follows the traditional role given by heteropatriarchy, and is located in the dominant position, whereas Maria becomes another 'child' to be protected by him, positioned in a submissive role.

Additionally, as Gilligan and Snider (2018) have reflected, patriarchy exists both internally and externally as a set of rules and values for men and women—breaking them may have real consequences. Therefore, much like a 'total institution', Maria's prison-like home also had a set of patriarchal house rules, which were enforced through violence. The act of physical violence narrated by Maria was the first of many to come in the next 20 years. As Nicolson (2019) has suggested, violent behaviours in relationships are rarely isolated events, because they evolve and change the quality of the relationship. Therefore, violence towards Maria became the way in which she was punished if she did not follow the patriarchal rules

imposed within her home. Physical violence was a product of her resistance to the patriarchal 'obedience test' (Goffman 1961: 26), to which she and her sons were required to submit (Avni 1991).

In a total institution, aligned to the set of rules, there is a programmed schedule; subjects lose their autonomy and everything is planned for them. As Avni (1991) suggested, a battered woman loses her autonomy in all aspects of her life; her house becomes the prison and her husband the jailer. Inside her house, as Maria narrated, activities were scheduled and imposed by her husband. For example, he controlled the house's payments and he had a schedule regarding what she must cook for dinner, in which meals could not be repeated in the following three months.

Goffman (1961) explained that one of the central characteristics of the total institution is that it is a place of confinement that breaks the barriers separating sleep, play and work. In the case of Maria, she and her sons did not have the freedom of mobility; everything had to be done inside the house and Carlos had the final call regarding every decision. Maria was not allowed to work and his presence annulled the possibility for the children to play at home, which transformed the dynamic between Maria and her sons. For example, Maria recalled how they had to maintain a rigid embodied attitude when her husband arrived home:

By then, we had our two sons, and that is when the violence got worse. When he went to work, I was so happy with my sons. We laughed, played, went to the park. But, an hour before he arrived, we all ... how do I say this ... assumed our roles. Everything had to be perfect.

Additionally, much like inmates inside a prison, Maria experienced constant surveillance and restricted contact with the outside world. Maria had limited contact with her family and was only allowed to visit them in the company of Carlos. Her husband's surveillance was intensified by her mother-in-law. As Maria recalled, her mother-in-law naturalised and validated the violent acts, acting as an external guarantor of the constitution of this patriarchal total institution. Hence, to Maria's mother-in-law, who had herself been protected by Carlos after her husband's death, it seemed that the psychological cost of actively opposing her son, or even acknowledging that his behaviour was violent and reproachable, was too great.

Undoubtedly, much like Goffman's (1961) description of the separation between authorities and inmates in total institutions, there is a separation between the self-proclaimed authority, Carlos, and those who were required to obey his orders, Maria and her sons. However, one structural difference between a prison-like home and a total institution is the ratio of surveillance. As previously observed, Carlos maintained a one-to-one ratio of surveillance with Maria (or one-to-three if their sons are included in the equation). As Avni (1991) suggested, this characteristic enforces a more totalitarian experience—in traditional total institutions, eventually the group can protect an individual and organise collective actions. As Avni (1991) emphasised, the home has been assumed as a private space, an allegedly unapproachable place, in which other people are not allowed to interfere. This social construct creates less possibilities for battered women to find support, creating an even more totalitarian situation.

Further, unlike the 'total institutions' described by Goffman (1961), Maria's house did not have concrete or geographical barriers that prevented her or her sons from leaving. However, Maria had constructed symbolic internal barriers that propelled her isolation. By then, as Gilligan and Snider (2018) have suggested, Maria had internalised patriarchy and it had become useful for her as a psychological mechanism. She became the 'police' of her own patriarchal 'total institution'. Her own sense of self was diminished. The physical acts of violence are one observable feature of a series of degradations and humiliations that were endured by Maria, but there is also a constant psychological violence. All of these have repercussions (in a subjective dimension) that affect the sense of self and, like the total institution, have the aim of mortifying the self. The mortification of the self was so powerful that Maria even started to question her own sanity and reality criteria, particularly the question of whether she was the one inflicting physical pain upon herself:

He never hit me on the face, always on my body. At the next day, I was changing clothes, and he saw the bruises and asked me: 'Maria, what is all that? And I asked him: 'are you serious? Don't you remember?' And he said to me: 'you have to check that with someone'. He got me confused, I sometimes wondered if I did it to myself, or maybe I was making things up.

Carlos' comment was manipulative—he expressed concern towards Maria, denying the possibility that he was capable of causing such damage to his wife. As Maria recalls, their relationship and their selves were fragmented:

For everyone, we were the perfect couple. Everybody told me that we looked too nice together. It was true, and he was a gentleman, so educated and polite. My family loved him. It was as if our marriage was divided in two. I loved him truly. Everything was perfect and nice. We would travel, go for walks with our sons. We were the perfect couple outside the house, but no one knew what happened inside. I always asked myself, how a man that loves me that much could be so aggressive with me, I could not understand that.

By including this quotation, I seek to highlight the importance of recognising the psychic ambivalences and intra-subjective conflicts Maria experienced regarding herself, her husband and the relationship. The experiences of battered women are complex and multidimensional. Following Morrissey (2003), I support the idea that mainstream feminist theory has tended to rely on victimology, emphasising how women are oppressed victims of heteropatriarchy and long-term gender inequalities. However, as the author suggested, victimology constructs women as oppressed and as victimised in their oppression. In other words, victimology reduces battered women to pathology and to non-intentional co-dependents. This type of strategy has been helpful for legal purposes, but it may become dangerous because it reproduces 'restrictive and disempowering stereotypes of women' (Morrissey 2003: 22). Therefore, it offers only a partial perspective on women, denying the possibility of integrating battered women's experiences.

Moreover, the subtle negotiations that women engage with themselves and their partners with while living in a situation of IPVA. Subjectivities are dynamic, contradictory and, as Anzaldúa (1987) has explained, the transformations of women's gendered subjectivities are not linear or coherent; rather, they involve contradictions and individual and collective setbacks. Referencing Lugones (2008), we must recognise the oppression-resistance dynamic and acknowledge activity within oppressive structures. In the case of Maria, it is unfair to portray her only as a victim of patriarchy and gender violence, thereby denying her agency (sometimes subtle or invisible). In fact, she found daily strategies to safeguard herself and her sons from violence inside her home, she negotiated with Carlos constantly and she denounced domestic violence twice to the authorities. However, once she regretted this and did not continue with the procedure. The second time, the local Peace Jury (a one-person judicial body that has authority in a jurisdiction where there is no trial court) sent them to family counselling. Finally, one day she changed the locks on her doors and separated from him. The homicide occurred when Carlos came to visit her while they were separated.

Maria's Time in the Santa Mónica Prison

After the homicide of her husband, Maria told her two sons what had happened and, the next day, she turned herself in to the authorities. When she arrived at Santa Mónica prison, the symbolic barriers transformed into concrete ones, but they provided her with a different sense of freedom. As mentioned in the theoretical section, the management of most prisons in the Global South requires prisoners' collective organisation. In Santa Mónica, the political order functions through co-governance, which implies systematic negotiations between prison staff and prisoners. These power relationships are reconfigured, giving prisoners the possibility of engaging in semi-autonomous acts and paths that increase agency within prison.

Maria faced the multiple characteristics of Goffman's 'total institutions'; however, she also found a space with increased flexibility, fewer restrictions on her mobility (despite being geographically restricted) and with less surveillance. Further, she was able to be in contact (and dialogue) with other women and with the possibility of engaging in a process of understanding the aggressions and humiliations she had undergone as patriarchal violence and, eventually, heal her own wounds. For example, Maria remembers that one of the most emotional situations for her occurred when she arrived in prison and met an older woman:

She was a very humble woman [referring to a poor woman]. She said to me '*Mamita*, you don't know me, but I know you, I have seen you on television and thought: that woman must have suffered a lot'. It felt very good. I thought, finally, someone believes me, someone does not only judge me.

Hence, it was in prison that Maria felt she acquired credibility (even if it was only from one person) and she was able to start verbalising and narrating her story. In other words, she experienced a sense of justice and, equally importantly, regained a sense of self that was degraded during her experience of IPVA before imprisonment. After some time, another prisoner invited her to the Catholic meetings with the nuns of the religious congregation of prison. Maria said:

Then, I felt peace. I sat at the back; I didn't feel worthy enough to sit at the front ... The sisters [referring to the nuns] asked if I wanted to help, that made me feel so good. I was able to enter the chaplaincy, clean the icons, I went to the second floor, organise things ... One day I was by myself, I remembered when I was very young, I was so shy, and I wanted to be in the chaplaincy, see the images and imagine: how much I would like to be at backstage, cleaning, doing things. So, at that moment, while I was cleaning, I realised 'I am doing what I always wanted to do'. So, I started crying remembering that I am really doing what I always wished to do ... I wanted to be like those women in the hospitals [referring to volunteers]. I told my husband once, but he said no.

Eventually, Maria became the coordinator of the choir, a sub-group of the Catholic Church. It is important to emphasise that engagement with the Catholic Church is a grey area inside the prison. Despite the fact that the Catholic religion is generally a site of discipline for women, in Santa Mónica, in particular, involvement with religious congregations provides a path for women to distance themselves from the formal order of prison and its penal discipline. By being a member (and eventually an authority) of the group, Maria has gained power within prison, faces reduced surveillance by prison staff and is able to legitimately perform semi-autonomous acts inside prison.

Moreover, members of the choir in Santa Mónica form an organised group, a community inside the prison. By 'community', I mean a collective of people defined by their cultural forms or practices, whose members have constructed inter-group trust and share a sense of belonging that fortifies cohesion and solidarity, enabling them to cope with difficulties as a group (Siddiqui 2019). In the case of the Catholic choir, its members meet three to four times a week and their decisions are made at group assemblies, in which all members are invited to participate. Further, their members create caring relationships that act as an emotional support system to cope with imprisonment. For example, they organise money collections among the members to buy birthday cakes, a small card or present and sing 'Happy Birthday' at the meetings.

After some time as a member of the group, Maria was elected to preside as Church coordinator—the maximum authority of the Catholic group in Santa Mónica. The role not only involves organising the choir activities, but also entails constant negotiations with authorities and other selected prisoners to organise all Catholic events in Santa Mónica (e.g., the organisation of Christmas, the *Via Crucis* and the spiritual retreat). In a co-governance structure, where religious activities have such a legitimate presence, Maria

was not elected by authorities or by the nuns, but rather by her peers, her *compañeras*. This experience provided Maria with more self-confidence, as she narrated:

I recognise I didn't trust myself. I felt incapable of doing lots of things ... I told them: I am not prepared. And the sister told me, not only your *compañeras* had elected you, but the Lord ... I appreciate it so much, that is when I started to break many things: my shyness, my fear of speaking in public, to express what I feel because I demanded myself to be responsible as my sisters are waiting to hear me, I was responsible of presiding the meetings and of knowing all the functions we had to assume in each of them.

By becoming the Church coordinator, Maria was introduced into the prison's political-public sphere. To accomplish her role, as she recalls, Maria had to learn traits generally associated with traditional masculinity and denied to hegemonic femininity. In fact, she had to learn or fortify her political and negotiating capabilities, such as how to communicate effectively, to possess organisational skills, to talk in public and to enter into dialogue rationally and strategically. In this sense, the notion of the caregiver (in traditional femininity) is reconfigured and subverted in a macro-political arena. In fact, as Church coordinator, Maria fortifies her political agency and her sense of self.

It is impossible to deny the disciplinary mode of religion. However, in this work, I aim to highlight the nuances of Maria's involvement with religion, given the context of imprisonment. I argue that, in religion, women find not only a connection to faith and a set of religious rules, but also a sense of legitimacy in meeting and having dialogue with other women and organising activities in a coercive space (e.g., prison). Their membership of the religious community propels the construction of interpersonal relationships with other women in prison; further, in an intersubjective manner, it is the path that has enabled Maria to start questioning traditional feminine social norms and her experience of IPVA. In this vein, Ahmed (2017: 2–3) has defined feminism as a movement, highlighting that:

Not all feminist movement is so easily detected. A feminist movement is not always registered in public ... If we think of the second-wave feminist motto 'the personal is political', we can think of feminism as happening in the very places that have historically been bracketed as not political.

Consequently, taking religious activities as a common platform, women prisoners engage in a feminist movement. It is a fragile movement and, in concrete terms, does not transform their role as imprisoned women in a patriarchal nation-state institution. Additionally, it also connects them to another patriarchal institution: the Catholic Church. However, the imprisonment experience contains the paradox that it is inside prison that many women, such as Maria, are able to share their experiences of violence and start to foster awareness that IPVA is not an individual situation but a collective one.

The fragile feminist movement is not public and does not involve major manifestations; rather, it comprises subjective moments (Ahmed 2017), subtle denunciations of patriarchal and violent situations among the *compañeras* and the construction of connections and identification between their members, which lead them to find a sense of their selfhood. This process is not coherent or linear, and is embedded with contradictions, but it implies a questioning of preceding violent situations. Through these encounters, women prisoners transform their subjective positionality towards hegemonic patriarchy. Inside hegemonic patriarchy, all involved subjects believe that this is the correct or desired form of living and the way to construct interpersonal relationships. To transform women's positions, hegemonic patriarchy should not only be questioned in a cognitive-rational manner, but also (and mainly) in an embodied-affective one. Maria, in her house and in her relationship with Carlos, had naturalised her sense of fear and the impossibility of moving her body. In prison, she is able to enact new performances and, through her actions, she is also able to break some barriers—created through the fear imposed by patriarchal domination—to pursue roles and activities that had been denied to and by her before prison.

As members of the Catholic community, women prisoners discuss religious topics; however, for the most part, they share their life experiences and even feel responsible for teaching younger prisoners life lessons, such as emphasising their role and value as women. In connection to this idea, in her research on battered women, Hoff (1990) reinforced the relational perspective of the subjects and suggested that women learn survival tactics through their close relationships with other women. As Maria said:

I understood something here. They told me: Maria, do you understand that your husband didn't want you to have any friends? That way he was controlling you, if you have friends, they would have talked to you, and they would've changed everything that he had accomplished with you.

In summary, Maria's imprisonment experience involves concrete barriers, as defined in Goffman's (1961) traditional concept of 'total institutions'. However, it also provides her with some elements that aid in questioning the symbolic barriers created through her IPVA experience. This section has shown the semi-autonomous paths she 'transited' within a porous institution. Maria serves her sentence in a patriarchal prison and it is crucial to understand that it is not her path through the formal order of prison that situates her in the paradox. Instead, it is the possibility of occupying a semi-autonomous space within prison, in her role in the Catholic group, that enables her to have some power within a coercive environment, to negotiate with prison staff, to construct interpersonal relationships with other prisoners and to start questioning—with contradictions and setbacks—her role and positionality as a woman.

Finally, I want to emphasise that the ideas presented here by no means seek to legitimise prisons, nor to demonstrate that imprisonment succeeds in providing an alleged 'resocialisation process'. All prisons are primarily punishment institutions (Foucault 1975) and, in Latin America, scholars and civil organisations have systematically denounced violations of prisoners' human rights (Antony 2007; Mapelli 2006; Washington Office in Latin America 2016). The ultimate objective of this paper is to move beyond a rigid or coherent analysis of subjectivities and coercive environments and to recognise the ambivalences, nuances and paradoxes of the intersection of gender, prison and imprisonment in the Global South. Therefore, I intend to unveil sites of personhood and recognise agency within these oppressive environments (Lugones 2008), distancing from a reductionist claim of women's oppression in prison (Hannah-Moffat 2001).

Concluding Remarks

Via unpacking Maria's story, I seek to analyse the connections between IPVA and imprisonment and how, before being imprisoned, many women lived in a symbolic, subjective and patriarchal total institution. Following imprisonment, the prison, which is theoretically described as a 'total institution', becomes a porous institution. Paradoxically, Maria's story encapsulates women's sense of freedom and imprisonment in Perú; as a case study, it highlights a common occurrence for many women in the Global South. In other words, it highlights the feeling of imprisonment while these women are legally 'free' and the feeling of 'freedom' while they are legally incarcerated. As mentioned earlier, patriarchal domination is a psychosocial problem with subjective-psychological implications, which naturalises a sense of fear, the immobilisation of women's bodies and mistrust in their reality criteria.

I have detailed how, during her experience as a battered women, Maria lived under constant surveillance by her husband, experienced restricted contact with her family, had a programmed routine and a set of patriarchal house rules and lived in a space of confinement that broke the barriers separating sleep, play and work. The physical violence inflicted when Maria broke the house rules, and the degrading experiences mentioned above, enhanced the mortification of the self. Following Avni (1991), the one-to-one ratio creates a more totalitarian experience for women experiencing IPVA, because the surveillance is more intense and, given the private nature of homes, women have less external or collective support.

In Santa Mónica, Maria is incarcerated in what Goffman defined as a total institution. However, given the political structure of co-governance, she is able to engage in legitimate semi-autonomous actions, find some power and authority within prison and share her experience of violence with other women. All of these processes are possible due to her membership of the Catholic group. I emphasise that it is not religious discourses that enable Maria's semi-autonomous performances, but rather the possibilities that the Catholic group provides within a coercive space such as a prison. In the case of Maria, it was her connection to the Catholic Church that gave her semi-autonomy. However, there are also other communities inside prison, such as entrepreneurs and artists, that deserve our attention as researchers. Further, Maria's story should also highlight the need to research women after imprisonment. This article analyses the paradox of her life before and during imprisonment—it would be interesting to follow Maria (in addition to other ex-prisoners) on her path into the 'outside' world again and to understand how her social life transforms (or not), given her experience of leadership inside Santa Mónica.

Finally, my aim is not to position prison as a successful resocialisation institution. On the contrary, I seek to criticise the position of women in a capitalist, patriarchal and colonised system, such as Peruvian society. It is undeniable that Latin American feminist movements have encouraged transformations in terms of rights; however, such changes tackle the figure but not the background. The story of Maria and its echoes in the stories of multiple prisoners in Santa Mónica shows that there has been a metamorphosis of patriarchy, but not a structural transformation. By saying this, I do not mean to ignore the conflicts, resistances and agencies women engage in, as seen in this article. However, I argue that it should outrage us as a society that women feel safer in prison than in their external communities

Correspondence: Dr Lucia Bracco Bruce, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, United Kingdom. Email: d.bracco-bruce@warwick.ac.uk

¹ In March 2019, one year before the health emergency, the Centres of Emergency for Women (propelled by MIMP) attended to 14,420 cases of gender violence (12,433 were women and 1,987 were men). The cases comprised 86 for economic violence, 7,207 for psychological violence, 5,834 for physical violence and 1,293 for sexual violence. As observed, in the first two weeks of the current health emergency, the number of claims of physical violence is equal to those for the whole month of March 2019.

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