

# Feministisches Geo-RundMail

Informationen rund um feministische Geographie

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Quelle: Kinderwunschklinik in Valencia, Spanien, Foto Credit: Tamara Sanchez-Pérez

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## Themenheft:

Geographies of reproductive in/justices

## Reproductive Justice and Incarceration: Experiences and Governance of Mothers in a Swiss Women's Prison

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### Introduction

While the first two dimensions of reproductive justice include the right to decide to have or not to have children, the concept also contains a third central point: the right to parent under enabling and violence-free conditions (cf. Ross & Solinger, 2017). Crucial to the concept is a focus on structural inequalities and intersectionality, moving beyond an individualistic liberal white feminist approach to reproductive politics mostly centering around abortion (ibid., 2017). One structure deeply affecting the abilities and rights to parent as addressed by reproductive justice's third dimension is carcerality, under which parents experience enhanced institutionalized control. In my Bachelor's thesis, I focused on mothers in one of those highly governed and surveilled carceral spaces where the rights and practices around parenting get profoundly altered and affected: prison. Women in detention constitute a marginalized group that faces gender-specific challenges during incarceration, one of which is motherhood. Within the expanding field of carceral geographies, the intimate experiences of these mothers and modes of governance of motherhood in prisons have been scarcely addressed (Schliehe, 2017).

Methodologically, I used a qualitative content analysis approach to assess interviews I conducted with two formerly incarcerated mothers (who have been separated from their children during imprisonment) and two prison staff members to examine the experiences and governance of incarcerated mothers in the women's prison in Hindelbank, Switzerland. The prison in Hindelbank is the only women-only prison in the German-speaking part of Switzerland and contains 107 of the 250 national prison places dedicated to women. In Hindelbank, all possible forms of penal detention and measures towards female offenders – from semi-open to high-security enforcement – are carried out, and the prison is organized in several different living units, one of which is designed for mothers to keep their children under the age of three with them in detention (Reichenau, 2021).

In the analysis, I built on previous studies and conceptualizations in carceral and maternal geographies, complemented by interdisciplinary research on women in prison and feminist geographic considerations of scale. Overall, I applied a feminist geographic perspective which focuses on the intimate experiences of mothers and simultaneously on

the governing multiscalarity of juridical systems, the location of prisons, and the very materiality of the prison itself, as Roth (2004: 415) writes: "Everything from political decisions about where to site and build prisons to jail- and prison-specific visitation policies to local implementation of federal and state foster care laws affects whether women prisoners can maintain their parental rights and relationships with their children". Although reproductive justice was not my primary conceptual focus, the data illustrates the complexity and intimacy surrounding reproductive justice in the context of imprisoned motherhood, where ostensible binaries like parent/prisoner, public/private, good/bad, or inside/outside blur. After the above introduction, this partial insight into my Bachelor's thesis is organized in a first section with a short summary of the main findings of the thesis, a second section focusing on the specific example of the mother-children unit in Hindelbank, and followed by a brief conclusion. The entire thesis can be accessed via the following link:

[https://www.geography.unibe.ch/forschung/sozial\\_und\\_kulturgeographie/lehre/abschlussarbeiten/index\\_ger.html](https://www.geography.unibe.ch/forschung/sozial_und_kulturgeographie/lehre/abschlussarbeiten/index_ger.html).

### Findings: Experiences and Governance of Mothers in Hindelbank

The analysis shows that incarcerated mothers in Hindelbank encounter additional harm in prison due to being mothers. Mothers, compared to non-mothers, were said to be more worried, stressed, burdened, restless, and less light-hearted in prison. The contradiction of being a mother but not being able to 'be there' for the children due to separation and having to endure a lot of uncertainties and powerlessness was observed by all interviewees.

"You're always torn, of course, you want to be there for the child, but you can't, and just because of that, you don't feel no longer like a real mother almost, you're really like ... I don't know ... you just don't feel worth it as a mother because you just can't be there for the child."

*Interview with a formerly incarcerated mother, 2022*

"Well, I think children are definitely a source of stress for the women cause they don't stop being a mother just because they are imprisoned, and if the children are unwell, if they are sick, if the children are in the hospital, then it's an immense lack of power that the women feel, cause they just cannot do anything and to bear that has to be one of the hardest things ... yes I think they just have different worries because they – because they are mothers."

*Interview with a prison staff member, 2022*

Nevertheless, positive aspects of being a mother and maintaining some parental rights and responsibilities despite the carceral circumstances have also arisen, e.g., children giving

their imprisoned mothers the strength to endure imprisonment and a perspective for the future. For example, both mothers I interviewed independently told me that at some point during their incarceration, they thought about or even intended to kill themselves because the situation felt no longer bearable and that it was their children keeping them alive:

“I had a call with him [her son], and then we really talked for a long, long time, and then I said it: I told him I was so sorry that I have to apologize, but I don’t want to – I just don’t want to live anymore, and then he said ‘mum yes you have to be there for me, I forgive you’ and when I heard that he – that HE forgave me then it was like a second life for me.”

*Interview with a formerly incarcerated mother, 2022*

“Well, I can remember one situation where I really didn’t want to live anymore. I was really not well then, and that’s when [name of daughter] was calling me. Of course, I didn’t show anything on the phone, and I just thought ‘I want to hear her one last time’, really already with the thought ‘I

don’t want to live anymore’ and then at the end of the call she, without knowing anything, said one sentence [laughs], she said ‘bye mummy, I love you so so much NEVER forget that you have a daughter who loves you more than anything’ and at that moment I could only cry, and I realized ‘shit ... okay I can’t do that, I can’t do that to her’.”

*Interview with a formerly incarcerated mother, 2022*

These intimate experiences of motherhood in prison were bound up in multiscale governing aspects. Enhanced by the federal system in Switzerland, the mother’s ability to parent in a self-determined way thus got influenced in complex ways dependent on their particular situation. Factors that govern imprisoned motherhood in Hindelbank are intertwined in an assemblage of influences, varying from the placement of the child, the intersecting personal and familial circumstances, and the nature of the sentence to the spatiality of the prison, its geographical location, the laws, or institutions, organizations and individual actors involved– to name just a few.

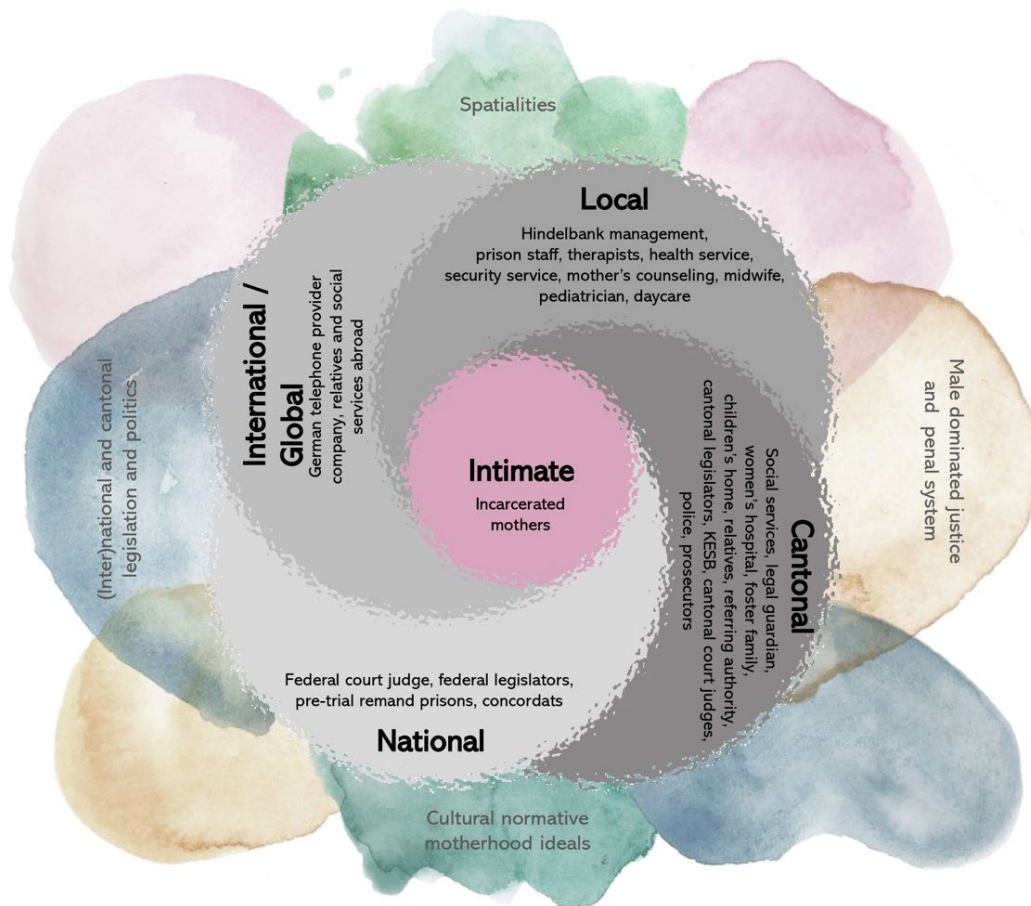


Figure 1: Overview of multiscale governance towards motherhood in Hindelbank (own graphic)

To create an overview of the governing aspects that came up during the interviews, I summarized and assigned the named actors to different scales (grey) around the intimate (rose) and the broader structures (watercolor) emerging from the data in a graphic. The different colors represent

that the governance and experiences occur not only across multiple scales but also in various spheres, e.g., political, societal, spatial, domestic, economic, or legal. Moreover, blurring the boundaries on the graphic was a means to visualize the intertwined characteristics and mutual interplays

between the actors and structures on different scales. Finally, this visual representation does not claim to be complete, as it is case-specific and shows the “power relationships in practice” (Griffin, 2012: 218, emphasis in original) based on the four conducted interviews. To acknowledge this, there are some fields left empty. For example, governing actors and structures might look very different for mothers without Swiss residence or nationality who are incarcerated in Hindelbank, since all four interviewees repeatedly mentioned that the situation is ‘much worse’ for foreign mothers, however, their realities are hardly represented in this data due to the limited sample size.

### **A special Space: The Mother-Children Unit in Hindelbank**

Only a few mothers get the chance to take their children with them to Hindelbank to live in the mother-children unit. For my Bachelor’s thesis, I was not able to talk to one of those mothers, however, both prison staff members I interviewed have longstanding experience of working with mothers living in that unit. According to the interviews, the decision whether a mother can keep her child in prison is influenced by multiple factors, first and foremost the age of the child (it has to be under 3 years old), the offense of the mother as well as financial considerations. Once placed in the unit and despite officially being independent and personally responsible for their children (most of them keep custody), mothers are subordinated to strict rules from Hindelbank. For example, mothers are obligated to work in prison and put their children into daycare five days a week as from the time they are four months old, they must get authorization for every time their child leaves the prison to visit relatives and they only have access to a limited selection of baby products like napkins or formula. Furthermore, mothers, while theoretically legally independent in parenting, in practice have to rely on prison staff and their approval for decisions regarding their children, which was said to be very hard to handle for many mothers (and the prison staff) as they cannot bring their children up like they would ‘outside’. Both prison staff members I interviewed repeatedly mentioned this dilemma as the most challenging aspect of the mother-children unit.

“They basically have all of the rights as a mother, they raise the child independently, they care for it independently so we don’t get involved there unless we see that something isn’t working out well, then it’s, of course, our task to take responsibility there and to say ‘this is not ok.’”

*Interview with a prison staff member, 2022*

“What I think is a difficult aspect is also kind of the supervision of the mother in parenting, health questions ... they have of course sometimes a completely totally different know-how depending on their culture on how they do that, and in the end, they don’t have the freedom to do it the way they want, like they are dependent on the staff, for example, giving medication suppositories in case of fever and so on.”

*Interview with a prison staff member, 2022*

These conflicts based on different perceptions of what a proper upbringing means were said to be rooted in different socio-cultural backgrounds. During the interviews, expressions like ‘their idea’ of nutrition and ‘our understanding’ of medicine were used, explaining, for example, that African mothers usually want a fat baby as they believe then they are healthy and therefore feed them too much sugar, whereas Roma mothers never breastfeed despite all the advantages prison staff members advocate for. Even though recognizing that the responsibility for the child lies with the mother, the interviewees mentioned situations where prison staff tried to educate the mothers in parenting, continually with good intentions and the goal to benefit the child. Such attempts to normalize certain normative ideas of gender stereotypes like mothering were repeatedly found during carceral research, as prison is a space where under the guise of resocialization, ‘bad’ or ‘different’ women should get transformed into ‘good’ women, into people – and consequently mothers – of ‘our kind’ with prison nurseries regularly “(re)produc[ing] a white, Western, middle-class idealized vision of motherhood and rehabilitation – which is inconsistent with the background of most of the imprisoned women” (Feintuch, 2017: 73; see also e.g., Moran et al., 2009; Sufrin, 2018).

Even though the mother-children unit in Hindelbank was not the primary focus of my thesis and I was not able to talk to a mother who lived there, these partial glimpses into the workings of the prison nursery suggest that the power imbalances in this carceral space compromise reproductive justice by structurally favoring and consequently enforcing a certain idealized way of parenthood onto the incarcerated mothers through the restrictive prison environment. Despite being legally responsible for their child, incarcerated mothers in this space seem to be much more restricted than enabled by the carceral environment and in practice highly subordinated to prison rules, management, and staff decisions.

### **Conclusion**

Thinking back to my Bachelor’s thesis from a reproductive justice perspective, it can generally be argued that incarceration, while creating complex and multifaced circumstances, does crucially alter and impair the mother’s rights and

abilities to parent under enabling conditions and free of institutionalized violence as framed by the concept of reproductive justice. The inmates are always considered prisoners and criminals first, and mothers – if, at all – second. Although – or maybe because – the penal law in Switzerland does not explicitly address motherhood, incarcerated women in Hindelbank experience a significant loss of their ability to act in their role as mothers, the consequences of which reach beyond the sentence:

“In conclusion, it just needs to be said that for me it’s not necessarily the prison sentence that is the real punishment but the guilty conscience I have towards my daughter, that’s the real punishment and I think I will carry that for a long time – my whole life ... that’s hard. I would have wished for a different childhood for her ... that feelings of guilt will be there forever because I’ve cheated her out of a lighthearted childhood and knowing that, THAT is the true punishment.”  
*Interview with a formerly incarcerated mother, 2022*

As an explorative study, my Bachelor’s thesis provides interesting insights into the experiences and governance of incarcerated mothers, bringing into dialogue carceral, maternal, and feminist geographies as well as interdisciplinary research. However, in the end, the thesis left me with more open questions than it answered, providing crucial starting points for much-needed further research to better understand and ultimately challenge and transform the realities of imprisoned mothers in Switzerland.

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