

Female inmates' perceptions about conjugal visitation: pros and cons of an intimate and sexual encounter

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Rationale/Background: The female imprisonment in Portugal is increasing and there has been paucity of research on the phenomenon. Also, little attention has been given to the experience of sexuality between heterosexual couples in the prison context, and on how inmates, in particular female inmates, construct, perceive and give meaning to their sexual relations. This study proves to be relevant due to the paucity of data on these issues, both in Portugal and internationally, especially considering it has a sample of women.

Research Questions: This study is based on the experience of female imprisonment, to understand the perception that prisoners registered or not in the Conjugal Visitation Program (CVP) have about the influence of this visit in the way women experience their imprisonment.

Methods: The most appropriate instrument for data collection in this study was the semi-structured qualitative interview. Therefore, our sample consists of 40 inmates, 20 of which were participating in the conjugal visitation program and 20 who did not participate in this type of visits. The method for sample selection was random and, finally, we used categorical content analysis.

Results: Concerning the women's position in both groups in relation to the CVP, this study found positive and negative attitudes both from the women participating in the program, as well as those who decided to not participate. Most inmates, highlight as one of the main positive aspects the fact that conjugal visits prevent her partner's infidelity and contribute to maintain family stability, referring that the emotional support is more valuable than the sexual intercourse that may occur during the conjugal visit. Concerning the main negative points, inmates from both groups name the discomfort and humiliation felt during the strip search and the fact that going to the conjugal visits gives rise to teasing comments from other inmates, which is viewed as a loss of their intimacy, interfering in the way they express their sexuality in the context of incarceration.

Conclusions: Most of the women interviewed agree concerning the influence exerted by conjugal visits on their experience of incarceration. According to the inmates, this influence is exerted both on the psychological well-being of the women who attend the conjugal visits, through the support they receive from their partners, as well as on their behaviour, as they avoid negative conduct that may have as punishment the loss of the conjugal visits. The attitudes of the interviewees towards conjugal visits, whether or not they participate in them, are related to the meanings they attribute to these visits - meaning of loss of intimacy when going to conjugal visits, or a meaning based mainly on the advantage of this type of visits in facilitating the maintenance of the conjugal bond, by allowing more interaction in a more isolated context with their partners, which, in turn, prevents their infidelity, in the inmates' opinion.

Key Words: Sexuality, female imprisonment, conjugal visits, attitudes, meanings.

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