

"Broken Ties and Lasting Labels: Stigmatization, Social Exclusion, and Recidivism in the Gendered Pathways of Incarceration in Tunisia"

Maissène Ben Arab, Jawher Besbes

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Abstract: The gendered nature of incarceration in Tunisia—where the lives of female prisoners remain largely invisible in dominant criminological theory—is critically examined in this article. Drawing on qualitative interviews with former detainees and informed by sociological and feminist theories of deviance, labeling, and social control, the research explores how imprisonment erases women's social identities, disrupts familial ties, and entrenches long-term exclusion. It identifies two key axes of this exclusion; **the erosion of family and social relationships**, which often amounts to symbolic social death, and **post-carceral stigmatization** that labels women as irredeemably deviant, undermining their prospects for reintegration. These processes are deeply rooted in the Tunisian sociocultural context, where prevailing norms of femininity, honor, and family amplify the punishment women face both during and after incarceration. The article argues that the penal system is not a corrective institution but rather a gendered space of social control that perpetuates cycles of recidivism and exclusion. By adopting an intersectional, women-centered perspective and foregrounding female voices and experiences, the study advocates for intersectional prison policy reforms and a rethinking of current penal strategies that reinforce gender inequalities.

Résumé

La nature genrée de l'emprisonnement en Tunisie—où la vie des femmes détenues demeure largement invisible dans la théorie criminologique dominante—est examinée de manière critique dans cet article. S'appuyant sur des entretiens qualitatifs avec d'anciennes détenues et éclairée par des théories sociologiques et féministes de la déviance, de l'étiquetage et du contrôle social, la recherche explore comment l'incarcération efface l'identité sociale des femmes, perturbe les liens familiaux et consolide l'exclusion à long terme. Deux axes principaux de cette exclusion sont identifiés : l'érosion des relations familiales et sociales, qui équivaut souvent à une mort sociale symbolique, et la stigmatisation post-carcérale, qui enferme les femmes dans une image de déviance irrémédiable, réduisant leurs chances de réinsertion. Ces processus s'inscrivent profondément dans le contexte socioculturel tunisien, où les normes dominantes de féminité, d'honneur et de famille amplifient la punition infligée aux femmes durant et après leur incarcération. L'article soutient que le système pénal n'est pas une institution corrective, mais un espace de contrôle social genré qui perpétue les cycles de récidive et d'exclusion. En adoptant une perspective intersectionnelle centrée sur les femmes et en mettant en avant leurs voix et leurs expériences, l'étude plaide en faveur de réformes intersectionnelles des politiques pénitentiaires et d'une refonte des stratégies pénales actuelles qui renforcent les inégalités de genre.

المخلص

تُناقش هذه المقالة بشكل نقدي الطابع الجندي للسجن في تونس، حيث تظل حياة السجناء غير مرئية إلى حد كبير في النظريات الإجرامية السائدة. واستنادًا إلى مقابلات نوعية مع نساء سبق لهن قضاء عقوبات بالسجن، وبالإستناد إلى نظريات سوسيولوجية ونسوية حول الانحراف، الوصم، والضبط الاجتماعي، تستكشف الدراسة كيف يؤدي السجن إلى محو الهوية الاجتماعية للنساء، وتفكيك الروابط الأسرية، وترسيخ الإقصاء على المدى الطويل. وتحدد المقالة محورين رئيسيين لهذا الإقصاء: تآكل العلاقات الاجتماعية والأسرية، الذي يعادل غالبًا "موتًا اجتماعيًا" رمزيًا، والوصم الاجتماعي بعد السجن الذي يصنف النساء كمُنحرفات غير قابلات للإصلاح، مما يحدّ من فرص انتماجهن مجددًا في المجتمع. وتتجزر هذه العمليات في السياق السوسيوثقافي التونسي، حيث تُعاقب القيم السائدة المرتبطة بالأنوثة والشرف والعائلة العفولت التي تتعرض لها النساء

خلال فترة السجن ويعدها. و تناقش المقالة النظام العقابي تبين انه ليس مؤسسة إصلاحية، بل فضاء للضبط الاجتماعي الجندي حيث يُكرّس دوامات التكرار والانحراف والإقصاء. ومن خلال تبني مقارنة تقاطعية تركز على النساء وإبراز أصواتهن وتجاربهن، تدعو الدراسة إلى إصلاح السياسات العقابية بشكل يأخذ بعين الاعتبار خصوصية النساء، وإلى إعادة التفكير في الاستراتيجيات العقابية الحالية التي تُعيد إنتاج اللامساواة الجندية.

Keywords:

Female incarceration, Social stigma, recidivism, reintegration, gender and prison.

Introduction:

The literature on incarceration has been shaped by paradigms that prioritize the experiences, behaviors, and reintegration paths of male prisoners, rendering incarcerated women both empirically and theoretically absent. In traditional criminology and the sociology of punishment, the incarcerated woman remains a relatively underexplored and poorly understood subject—too often approached through stereotypes, or rendered entirely invisible. This epistemological absence is not solely due to the relatively low proportion of women in prison populations, but also reflects deeper sexist biases within both penitentiary institutions and the academic disciplines that seek to understand them. The historical foundations of global prison systems—constructed by and for male subjects—have contributed to the formation of a penal imaginary in which women are perceived as anomalies. Their incarceration is interpreted not merely as a violation of the law, but as a disruption of the social order, a violation of normative femininity, and an affront to the moral expectations traditionally imposed on women as mothers, daughters, and caretakers. As such, the female inmate is a doubly deviant figure: deviant in relation to the law and deviant in her transgression of gendered social roles. This convergence of legal and moral condemnation produces a unique experience of punishment, deeply rooted in processes of social stigmatization and symbolic exclusion.

In the Tunisian context—a country positioned at the intersection of Arab-Muslim cultural norms, postcolonial state governance, and ongoing political transformations—these dynamics are particularly salient. The sociocultural construction of women in Tunisia, as in much of the Arab world, is bound by strict expectations regarding honor, family reputation, and sexuality. Women who come into contact with the law are not only punished by the state but also stigmatized by society in ways that deeply shape their experiences during and after incarceration. The process of imprisonment thus represents more than just a deprivation of liberty; it constitutes a disruption of a woman's social identity, a degradation of her moral status, and often a permanent reclassification as a social deviant.

This article seeks to explore the gendered nature of incarceration in Tunisia through an analysis of how imprisonment devastates women's social relationships and generates long-term patterns of exclusion that persist well beyond their release. Based on qualitative data gathered through in-depth interviews with former female offenders and grounded in sociological and feminist theories of deviance, labeling, and social control, the article highlights two interrelated phenomena: (1) the rupture of social ties—particularly familial ones—caused by incarceration, and (2) the stigmatizing post-carceral labeling as a structural barrier to reintegration and a common source of recidivism.

The first axis of this critique is the rupture of familial and community ties that so often accompanies the incarceration of women. In many cases, women enter prison already marginalized from social and economic life—often due to poverty, gender-based violence, limited access to education, or childhood trauma. Rather than serving as a space for rehabilitation or protection, prison all too often exacerbates these preexisting vulnerabilities. Perhaps the most distressing aspect of prison life for Tunisian women is not merely the loss of freedom, but the loss of family—particularly in contexts where women's social legitimacy is so heavily tied to their role within the household. According to the testimonies collected in this study, women report experiencing extreme rejection from their families, who disown or exclude them upon release. This abandonment by the family serves to enforce the prison sentence and constitutes a process of social death in itself—a formulation that encompasses the physical boundaries of the prison but also explains the symbolic erasure of women from the moral and familial order. It is the rupture of familial and community ties that so often accompanies the incarceration of women. In many cases, women enter prison already marginalized from social and economic

Maissène Ben Arab, Jawher Besbes

life, often due to poverty, violence against women, limited access to education, or childhood trauma. Rather than being a space of rehabilitation or protection, prison all too often accelerates these preexisting vulnerabilities. The most troubling aspect of prison life for Tunisian women may not be the loss of freedom

alone, but also the loss of family—especially in contexts where women's social legitimacy rests so heavily on their roles within the household. According to the testimonies collected in this study, women report experiencing extreme rejection by their families, who disown or exclude them upon release. This abandonment by relatives reinforces the prison sentence and contributes to a process of social death—a process that extends beyond the physical confines of incarceration to encompass the symbolic erasure of women from the moral and familial community.

The second axis examines the processes of social labeling that shape women's identities upon release from prison and severely limit their reintegration prospects. Drawing on Howard Becker's (1963) labeling theory, the article analyzes how the label "ex-prisoner" becomes a socially constructed marker of deviance from which women cannot escape. This stigma, often expressed through the pejorative Tunisian dialect term "*mte3 ħbousset*", becomes attached to women's bodies and lives, thereby closing off opportunities for employment, housing, marriage, and social mobility. For most of the women interviewed—though with some exceptions—this social stigma proves more punitive than prison itself. It operates both implicitly—through rejection, gossip, and community surveillance—and explicitly, such as through denial of access to state-supported reintegration programs or workplace discrimination.

The overlap of these two pressures—the dissolution of social ties and the intensification of stigmatizing labels—creates a carceral continuum in which punishment extends beyond legal sanctions. This results in a self-perpetuating cycle of exclusion that, in many cases, drives women toward the informal economy, precarious work, or survival strategies that are themselves criminalized, such as prostitution. In the majority of cases, these paths lead back to prison, illustrating that women's recidivism is often not a matter of moral failure, but a structural outcome of unresolved stigma and unsupported reintegration. Here, prison is not used as an institution of rehabilitation, but rather as a link in a broader system of social regulation that disciplines women through exclusion. By situating these issues within their Tunisian context, this article contributes to a broader critique of penal policies that fail to consider the gendered nature of punishment. It also seeks to disrupt dominant criminological paradigms that universalize the male experience and enact patriarchal assumptions about crime, responsibility, and redemption. In doing so, the study calls for a more intersectional and nuanced engagement with the sociology of imprisonment—an approach that centers women's voices, is attuned to the local cultural moment, and critically examines the role of social institutions in producing inequality.

Finally, this article aims not only to document the lives of incarcerated women in Tunisia, but also to theorize the prison itself as a gendered institution that reinforces broader social hierarchies and moral economies. By focusing on social stigma and post-carceral exclusion, the article seeks to highlight how women's incarceration functions as a system of social control—one that reinforces gender norms and restricts women's autonomy far beyond the formal boundaries of the penal system. The findings presented here have broad implications for prison reform and gender justice, and they call for the immediate implementation of policies that address the specific needs of women, both inside and outside prison walls.

I. Female Incarceration: Global and Conceptual Context

1. Conceptualizing Incarceration

The prison environment is a complex space that raises numerous issues, both for researchers and for the various stakeholders involved. One of the reasons for this complexity lies in the fact that little is known about prisons and life within them, and even less about the world of women's incarceration. Sociologically, this realm remains largely unexplored and poorly understood.

This situation could be explained by the relatively small number of women in prisons compared to men. This disparity itself can be attributed, according to several theories, to the lower involvement of women in crimes and offenses or to the leniency and even preferential treatment that female offenders may receive. And yet, the incarceration of women is a universal and timeless reality. Women who have committed offenses against public order or the values recognized by society are placed in penitentiary institutions specifically designated for them. This part presents the number of incarcerated women worldwide and its evolution. This is a necessary step to understand the current trends of such a phenomenon. Second, significant attention is given to describing

incarcerated women in Tunisia in an attempt to understand the scale and progression of this issue. Finally, the chapter examines the limited interest given to incarcerated women in sociological research.

2. Global and Historical Overview

Conceptually, the notion of incarceration seems easy to grasp. In its general sense, it refers to the act of incarcerating, that is, placing someone in prison. According to Jean Claude Soyer, incarceration has the same meaning as detention and signifies the "act of detaining, of keeping in one's custody."

Nevertheless, from a legal perspective, incarceration refers to the act of imprisoning a person who has committed a criminal offense to serve a prison sentence. Detention, on the other hand, includes individuals held in prison while awaiting trial. These individuals may be acquitted or convicted; in the latter case, this is referred to as preventive detention.

In the literature of prison sociology, it is common to use the term "detainee" interchangeably with "incarcerated," often incorrectly.

While the majority of prisoners are men, incarceration also affects women. It involves the legal deprivation of liberty for women who are prosecuted or convicted of committing offenses. Incarceration is carried out through placement in penitentiary facilities or, more rarely, in areas specifically equipped to accommodate women.

In fact, it is important to distinguish between provisional detention and definitive detention. The former applies in cases of presumed guilt (the accused) while awaiting trial. The latter results from a conviction and therefore a confirmation of guilt (the convicted); this constitutes incarceration.

In the context of this study, and in examining the incarceration of women in Tunisia, the focus will be on women who have been convicted. This restriction is justified by my interest in this work in the relational experience of women in prison during their relatively long stay in the penitentiary institution.

II. Female Incarceration in Tunisia: Numbers, Institutions, and Conditions

1. Statistics, Trends, and Institutional Framework

In Tunisia, as with men, the responsibility for the custody of women deprived of their liberty by judicial decision is entrusted to the penitentiary administration services, which fall under the General Directorate of Prisons and Rehabilitation.

The public penitentiary service also has the mission, regarding all women entrusted to it by judicial authority, to facilitate their social reintegration. The penitentiary administration, which only acts under judicial mandate, is under the Ministry of Justice.

From an informational standpoint, no information or statistics are published at the national level on the Tunisian prison system, nor on the prison population, whether male or female. This opacity persists despite the commitment of Tunisian prison officials to international experts from the Geneva Centre for the Governance of the Security Sector (DCAF) to establish adequate infrastructure to enhance the standardization, digitization, dissemination, and analysis of prison statistical data in Tunisia.

The absence of any national statistical publication regarding the prison population in Tunisia is extremely concerning. In its fifty-fourth session, the Human Rights Committee expressed regret that the availability, relevance, accessibility, and sharing of data related to the incarceration of women, in general, and the conditions of their incarceration in Tunisia, remain a persistent challenge.

In a 2014 reports on the role of gender in the reform of the Tunisian prison system, published by the UN and DCAF and reviewed by the Tunisian Ministry of Justice, it was noted that the Tunisian judicial system is not adequately adapted to meet the specific needs of incarcerated women. The prison infrastructure, primarily designed for a male prison population, makes it difficult to carry out daily activities and does not allow for the provision of adequate training and rehabilitation services for incarcerated women. The healthcare infrastructure does not meet international standards. The report also highlights another issue : the prison staff is insufficiently trained to provide proper care for women inmates.

The aforementioned report indeed states that there is a significant gap between practice and the legislation in place. The justice system for women remains insufficient in its current state. An analysis of the situation reveals several shortcomings :

Firstly, there is a lack of capacity among justice actors to handle cases involving women in conflict with the law, due to a lack of professionalism, ignorance of the specific needs of incarcerated women, and failures in the coordination system between the concerned ministries.

Secondly, there is weakness in social reintegration, due to the absence or inadequacy of mechanisms for monitoring women in conflict with the law. This is despite the existence of a "Technical Commission" within the Ministry of Justice, responsible for monitoring, assisting, and reintegrating women released from prison, which remains poorly functional.

Finally, there are violations of human rights. Inmates are often subjected to cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment, as noted by allegations and the impunity of those responsible for such violations.

This reality calls for reflection on the actions to be implemented in order to ensure that women in conflict with the law benefit from a more effective justice system. Programs related to alternatives to imprisonment are proposed for women with children under their care.

Since 2011, and in the context of a general democratic transition, Tunisia has committed to reforming its prison system within a framework of good governance based on transparency, respect for international laws, and human rights. In this regard, Tunisia has ratified the Optional Protocol to the United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, as well as the constitutional protection of human rights.

As part of this general commitment, penal and penitentiary legislation will be reviewed and adapted to international standards. A change in the foundations of judicial intervention and the handling of women who have committed offenses is currently under consideration. Since 2014, Tunisia has been discussing the consideration of gender in the reform of its prison system within the framework of the potential application of the "Bangkok Rules," which aim to adapt penitentiary regimes to the specific needs of incarcerated women and reduce their incarceration.

However, it remains true that in Tunisia, many women are detained in deplorable and degrading conditions, are victims of abuse, are deprived of education and access to constructive activities, and have no contact with the outside world.

In detention centers (prison/pavilion), different categories of women are mixed: criminals, delinquents, women detained for unpaid checks or drug use, and women involved in terrorism cases. It seems paradoxical that the same treatment, the same punishments, and the same detention conditions are applied to such a heterogeneous population of incarcerated women.

It seems that, despite all these perspectives, the prison institution in Tunisia remains silent about its functioning and the publication of statistics. Theoretically, access to prisons is subject to prior authorization granted after a request. In reality, your request remains unanswered and your journey is unproductive. Access to statistics or any other documentation about the penitentiary system is officially very difficult, if not impossible.

In order to gather information about imprisoned women in Tunisia, I had to go through unofficial channels. A request for access to statistics was submitted to the administration of criminal affairs. No response was received. The numerical data on incarcerated women were obtained through personal connections. No related publications are available to the public (Appendix n°1).

The description of the female prison population presented in this work is partly based on data that was difficult to collect from the Directorate General of Prisons and Rehabilitation of the Ministry of Justice, as well as data published by the World Prison Brief (WPB) and the Institute for Criminal Policy Research (ICPR).

2. A Descriptive Analysis of Incarcerated Women in Tunisia

According to Article 7 of Law No. 2001-52 of May 14, 2001, relating to the organization of prisons in Tunisia, incarcerated women are either placed in women's prisons or in separate pavilions within other prisons. Their supervision is entrusted to female guards under the authority of the prison director. The director is not authorized to enter the women's pavilions unless accompanied by a female guard or, in the absence of one, by two other officers.

Women's prisons or pavilions are places where the deprivation of liberty occurs for women over the age of eighteen who have been sentenced for offenses or crimes.

Article 7 bis (Law No. 2008-58 of August 4, 2008) provides special treatment for pregnant or breastfeeding detainees, who must benefit from appropriate detention conditions, including adequate space, medical, psychological, and social assistance.

In Tunisia, prisons and pavilions for women fall under the Directorate General of Prisons and Rehabilitation, an institution that operates under the Ministry of Justice in accordance with Law No. 2001-51 of May 3, 2001. Among the twenty-seven existing prisons in Tunisia, only one is exclusively reserved for women : the Manouba prison located in Tunis, which houses nearly half of the female prison population. The other half is incarcerated in eight pavilions located within prisons primarily intended for men, but the women are fully separated from them. Furthermore, prisons in Tunisia are predominantly single-gender institutions designed to accommodate men, with women's prisons being adaptations of this model, without consideration for the specific needs of women.

The women's pavilions, located within men's facilities, effectively limit the women's access to various services and training opportunities.

Without specifying women, Article 27 of the Tunisian Constitution guarantees humane detention conditions that preserve the dignity of prisoners. Article 29 states that the main objectives of prisons are to ensure education and rehabilitation to prevent recidivism and to facilitate reintegration into society.

Tunisian law provides for the equal treatment of detainees, without any distinction between men and women, except for the possibility for women to keep their children under the age of 2 with them.

According to the figures obtained through unofficial channels from the prison administration, the number of incarcerated women in Tunisia was 683 in December 2018. It is important to specify that this figure only includes women who have been sentenced. If the number of pretrial detainees is considered, this figure would rise to 1,677 as of the same date (Annex No. 2). Therefore, there would be as many pretrial detainees as sentenced women in the women's correctional facilities in Tunisia. The very high number of pretrial detainees in Tunisian male prisons is, in fact, one of the main reasons for prison overcrowding and the deterioration of living conditions within the walls.

An evolving description of the female prison population and its comparison with the total prison population would provide insight into its relative significance.

The table below outlines the evolution of the number of incarcerated women in Tunisia between 2008 and 2018 in a comparative framework with the total prison population.

Table No. 3 : Evolution of the Number of Incarcerated Women in Tunisia (2008-2018)

Years	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Women	698	567	682	571	566	575	663	722	671	611	683
Men	27759	28718	28674	22865	19949	22908	23166	24908	22992	21637	22495
Total	22495	29483	29356	23436	20515	23483	23829	25630	23663	22248	23178

Source : reconstructed from the statistics of the General Directorate of Prisons and Rehabilitation.

According to official figures from the Tunisian Ministry of Justice, the female prison population in Tunisia is estimated at 683 women (2018). It can be observed that this figure remained relatively stable over the period considered (2008-2018), with an average of just over 655.

In relative terms, the number of incarcerated women increased by 20.67% between 2012 and 2018. This increase was only 12.76% for men.

The statistics reveal a significant disparity between the number of women and men incarcerated. A comparison of the number of women to that of men confirms a large imbalance. Between 2008 and 2018, incarcerated

women were extremely minority, with an average proportion of 2.7% of the male prison population, which represents 2.63% of the total prison population.

It is important to note that the proportion of incarcerated women in the total prison population has never exceeded 2.9% since 2008.

However, these figures should not obscure another concerning statistic, which is the high number of women who are detainees awaiting trial. This number stood at 1,677 at the end of December 2018.

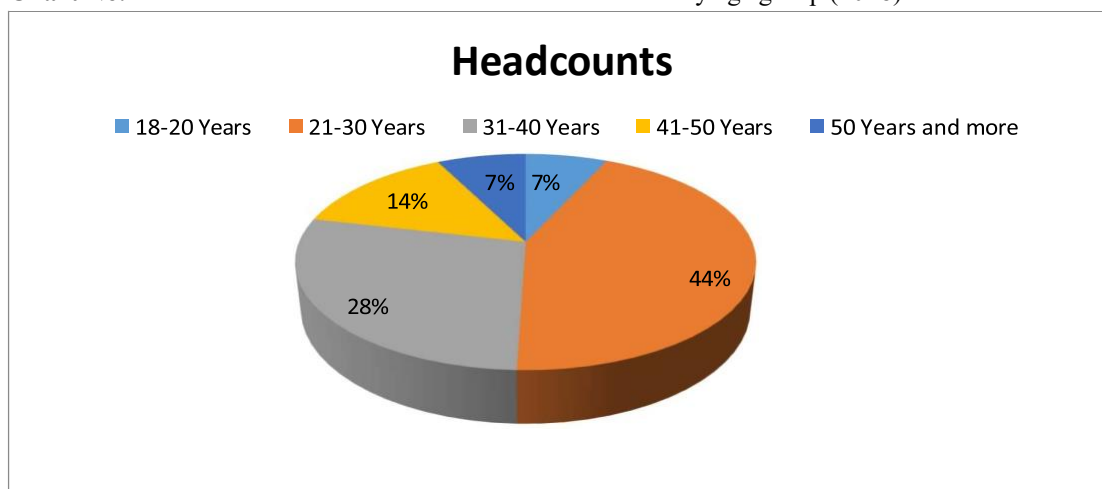
In addition to criminal, infrastructural, and delinquent causes, the explanation for the significant proportion of detainees in prisons should be sought in the legal system in place. The Tunisian justice system resorts to detention for minor offenses such as drug use or unpaid checks. In its 2014 report on the situation of prisons in Tunisia, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights reports that 26% of those sentenced in Tunisian prisons are convicted for drug use.

The excessive use of preventive detention and its duration also provide a reasonable explanation for the high number of detainees awaiting trial. Indeed, statistics indicate that preventive detainees in Tunisia account for an estimated 52%. Article 85 of the Code of Criminal Procedure stipulates that preventive detention can last up to 6 months.

Excluding detainees awaiting trial, the available statistics on the age distribution of incarcerated women (Appendix No. 3) in Tunisia point to a trend of younger populations.

In 2018, women aged between 20 and 30 years were overrepresented, accounting for 43.6%, followed by those aged between 30 and 40 years, making up 28.1%. The proportion of incarcerated women aged 40 to 50 years was 13.9%. Statistically, the proportions of incarcerated women over 50 years old and under 20 years old were significantly lower, at 7.46% and 6.8%, respectively.

Chart No. 1 : Distribution of incarcerated women in Tunisia by age group (2018)



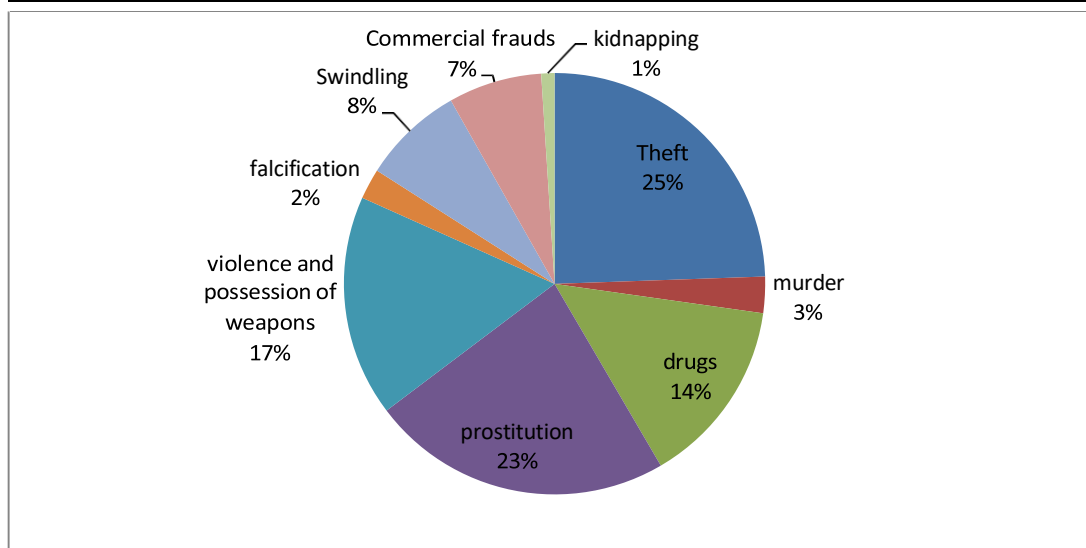
Source : Reconstructed from data obtained from the Department of Criminal Affairs.

Statistics indicate that in Tunisia, women are generally imprisoned for minor and non-violent offenses.

The distribution of the female prison population (2018) by crimes and offenses committed (Appendix No. 4) reveals a concentration in four main categories : theft, prostitution, violence, and drug-related offenses.

In 2018, over 24% of incarcerated women were convicted of theft and 23% were imprisoned for prostitution and 17% were convicted of violence and 14.34% were incarcerated for drug-related offenses.

Graph 2 : Distribution of incarcerated women in Tunisia by types of offenses committed (crimes/misdemeanors, 2018).



Source : Reconstructed from data obtained from the Department of Criminal Affairs

The proportions of women incarcerated for fraud/avoidance, commercial fraud, and murder were respectively nearly 8%, 7%, and 3%. Women serving sentences for forgery represent only 2% of the total incarcerated women.

The proportion of women imprisoned for kidnapping is statistically very negligible and represented barely 1% of the total female prison population in 2018. Nevertheless, the causes of female incarceration in Tunisia have changed significantly. Between 2008 and 2018, the number of women incarcerated for drug-related offenses more than doubled (2.56%). The proportion of detainees convicted of document forgery doubled, and those for violence and possession of weapons increased by 1.4 times. The number of women arrested for murder increased by 1.4 times between the two dates considered.

In fact, it is very difficult, in the absence of appropriate studies and analytical frameworks, to provide explanations for this evolution. Explaining such a complex and multifaceted social reality as the causes of female incarceration in Tunisia would require considering the economic, social, and political situation. Understanding the causes of incarceration and its evolution would help provide appropriate solutions to mitigate the issue of female incarceration. Regarding the conditions of detention for women in Tunisia, aside from reports from certain international bodies, no attention is given by the authorities to this issue. In its 2014 report on the situation of prisons in Tunisia, Penal Reform International (PRI) published an assessment of the detention conditions for women in Tunisia. Based on a sample of 201 incarcerated women (111 at Manouba prison and 90 at Mesaadine), the results of the study showed deplorable conditions. PRI laments the ineffectiveness of the penitentiary policies implemented since 2005.

PRI emphasizes that the institutions are neither staffed nor equipped to manage this situation. For example, Manouba prison has only two sociologists, five assistants, one doctor, and one psychologist for over 300 detainees. Yet, the study's findings reveal the significant vulnerability of incarcerated women. In fact, 71% of the surveyed women were depressed, 27% suffered from somatic disorders, and 20% had contemplated suicide. The results of this study showed that incarcerated women are more vulnerable than men in terms of mental health and should therefore receive appropriate and additional therapeutic treatment. Before incarceration, the majority of incarcerated women had been victims of domestic or sexual violence. In detention, their mental health issues and vulnerability can only worsen. Specific treatment is essential if we are to achieve the dual goal of rehabilitating incarcerated women and reintegrating them into society. At the end of this presentation, it seems that the situation of incarcerated women in Tunisia remains largely unknown. In the Tunisian context, aside from reports from certain international bodies, no academic work has

been developed on the lives of incarcerated women, except for an article published in 2015 on the sexuality of women in Manouba prison. The little attention given to gender issues in prison research is also quite evident. This raises the question of why incarcerated women do not constitute a priority area of interest for researchers.

III. The Role of Gender in Prison Sociology: Invisible Women, Unspoken Incarceration

From a general perspective, the consideration of gender in sociological studies and social sciences was very late. Colette Parent points out that social research before 1970 completely ignored women. It was only in the early 1970s, with the first feminist demonstrations for women's rights, that social studies, mainly Anglo-American, introduced gender into their analyses.

Joan Scott notes that the interest in gender research stemmed from a desire to revise prevailing scientific tools and distance themselves from classical analyses that tended to explain sexual distinctions through substantial biological determinism, which implicitly suggested the impossibility of change.

From a social dimension, gender is presented as a social construct. In this perspective, gender is a consequence of social and cultural norms that differently assign roles and values to women and men. As such, gender is a tool for analyzing various mechanisms of constructing the unstable social order, subject to transformations.

In France, it wasn't until the mid-1990s that gender dimensions were effectively imposed as an analytical tool in social science research. Michelle Perrot's work on gender played a significant role in reconstructing and renewing historical knowledge about women and reconsidering both theoretical and empirical knowledge about them. In doing so, she contributed significantly to the development of gender research in France, not only in history but also in other disciplines. Gender, as presented by Juliette Grange, is a perspective that can be applied to all fields of knowledge.

As an analytical category, the consideration of gender has promoted the trend of developing research on women and their social experiences from the perspective of constructing the social order of gender disparity. Gender studies have contributed significantly to the understanding of women's specificities, previously ignored.

The introduction of gender has, thus, led to a redirection of research fields in various disciplines toward a new perspective aiming to address women's issues and their potential specificities. Moreover, the concept of gender has stimulated numerous reflections in social sciences by exploring new areas of investigation and opening up social zones that were previously closed. This approach had a significant impact on social research by uncovering its biases and androcentric nature. Indeed, the field of research was predominantly focused on studies concerning men.

In this regard, ethnographers like J.C. Mitchell completely ignored women in their research, studying only men. In his study on the social life of Bantu societies in Mozambique between 1947 and 1948, J.C. Mitchell adopted theoretical and ideological references that obscured the social and political role of indigenous women. Yet, such roles were crucial in the matrilineal tribal society being studied. The negation of women in this author's research fits within a broader context of ethnographic work that assumed the universality of male dominance and presented their analyses with an androcentric perspective.

The masculine influence also marked the first sociological studies on deviance, delinquency, and crime from the Chicago School in the 1920s. In their attempt to explain organized crime represented by gangs, the leaders of this school implicitly considered only young men.

Frederic Thrasher, in his estimation of the membership of Chicago gangs in 1927, reported that they counted 25,000 delinquent young men. Clifford Shaw, for his part, chose to follow the life story of a young delinquent over a period of 16 years to understand the various factors likely to explain delinquent behavior. According to Shaw, delinquency could certainly be explained by mental processes, but was also the product of a complex set of social factors: living conditions, environment, and social circle.

In 1929, a pioneering study on criminogenic areas by C. Shaw, F. Zorbaugh, L. Cottrell, and H. McKay focused on studying 60,000 delinquents and criminals, who were curiously all men. The results of this study were considered to represent the rates of general delinquency, which would imply that women were excluded from the phenomenon of delinquency.

During the 1970s, researchers in the social field benefited from feminist inquiries and actively contributed to the development of fundamental concepts to renew social analysis, which had been considered limited up to that point.

In sociology, the consideration of gender facilitated a redirection of researchers' interests towards women's social experiences. A vast and diverse wave of scientific productions contributed to enriching the repertoire of expanding gender sociological studies. All these studies have, from a gendered perspective, contributed to broadening theoretical and empirical knowledge in sociology by revealing new data on women and reshaping the discipline's landscape.

By challenging the classic sociological view centered on men, these studies focused on the social analysis of women's situations by addressing the issue of women's positions within society and the family.

The rise of gender studies led to a shift in understanding the situation of women within the emergence of socio-economic and political systems in modern societies.

This interest in women drove the development of a first generation of research focused on investigating married life, violence against women, the body and sexuality, differentiated socialization, and social and cultural codes. These works aim to demonstrate that the concept of gender refers to the fact that the relationship between women and men is not due to natural determinism but rather to a social construction, which is therefore subject to deconstruction and reconstruction. It is within this framework that Richard Gelles' work on domestic violence in the United States, Marie Blanche Tahon's work on gender, body, and sexuality, and Véronique Rouyer et al.'s work on socialization and gender are situated.

A second generation of research sought to analyze the relationships between women and economic and political structures. In her study on women's work, Gay Gullickson showed that despite the presence of women in the industrial sector, they remain confined to subordinate and low-paying activities. Laura-Lee Downs argues that gender is a determining factor in wage disparity in the salaried sphere. Thus, for the same work performed, women are paid less than men. According to the same author, this segregation can be explained by the fact that women are paid according to their needs, while men are paid according to the estimated value of their work. An examination of the areas addressed by gender sociology clearly reveals the scarcity of studies on incarcerated women. The topic of women's prisons has remained marginal in both prison sociology and gender sociology more generally. On the other hand, male incarceration has been well explored. It seems that, in prison sociology, the consideration of women's issues is still very limited.

Indeed, despite the great interest shown by researchers in the prison system and its occupants, scientific production tends to show that sociological studies that consider gender are very rare. It is quite incomprehensible that incarcerated women are the subject of so few scientific studies. Sociologists have dedicated most of their research to prisoners in general, without specifying women. Prison studies in sociology have primarily focused on men.

Prison sociology, for the most part, has been male-dominated. For many authors, the prison is likened, by its foundation and mode of operation, to an institution essentially for men. Maurice Godelier even goes as far as to describe prison as a "house for men." Philippe Combessie sees sex as a determining variable of discrimination within prison.

The pioneers of prison studies have, moreover, contributed to the sociological silence on the issue of incarcerated women. The first research on prisons, conducted in the 1940s in the United States, explored the lives of male prisoners while neglecting or subsuming the experiences of women. Women were invisible, and the issue of their incarceration was completely marginalized or not even considered.

The Prison Community, a seminal work in prison research by Donald Clemmer, published in 1940, is no exception to this denial. In his pioneering study of the prison environment, Donald Clemmer analyzed the adaptation process of prisoners, considering an exclusively male sample. No mention was made of female prisoners.

This same silence regarding incarcerated women marked Michel Foucault's later works, which, while explaining the tortures of the old regime and presenting imprisonment as a fundamental form of punishment in

modern society, did not mention women as offenders, thus giving the false impression that only men were subject to punishments.

In current prison research, despite the importance of theoretical and empirical production on the subject, this gendered dimension continues, contributing to the perception of "prison" as essentially a male environment. Indeed, a large number of in-depth studies on the male prison population continue to be conducted, while a gap remains for incarcerated women.

Given this observation, one cannot help but wonder about the reasons for the scarcity of academic studies on incarcerated women and their social invisibility.

The reasons for the silence in prison sociology regarding the female population are certainly numerous. Perhaps the low number of women in prison is one reason. The supposedly non-dangerous, typically feminine crime could be another. The prevalence of the "gender stereotype," to use Corinne Rostaing's expression, is another significant reason. In prison sociology, as elsewhere, women are particularly underrepresented.

IV. Empirical Findings: Stigmatization and Social Death

1. Rupture of Social and Familial Ties

Whether male or female, individuals who have experienced incarceration encounter numerous challenges when attempting to reintegrate into society. However, women often find themselves in a particularly vulnerable position—especially in the Tunisian, Arab-Muslim context, where social norms are less forgiving toward women who have committed offenses.

The crime rate continues to rise in contemporary society, driven by multiple factors, including the spread of risky behaviors among youth, as noted by David Le Breton. As a result, an increasing number of young people, including women, are subject to imprisonment. Although prison is intended to serve as a space for behavioral correction, it frequently becomes a source of social condemnation. According to the women interviewed in this study, this condemnation is especially painful when it comes from their own families. Incarceration thus emerges as a powerful mechanism of social exclusion.

Philippe Combessie (2005), in his work *Women, Integration, and Prison: Analysis of the Socio-Professional Integration Processes of Women Leaving Prison in Europe*, states: "Imprisonment excludes women who were not previously socially excluded, and reinforces the exclusion of those who already were" (p. 58).

Interviews conducted for this research highlight the depth of this stigmatization. One participant shared: "When I got out, my family didn't want me anymore. I had nowhere to go." Such testimonies illustrate the familial rejection and marginalization experienced by many women. For several of them, losing access to the family home becomes a post-carceral reality. With no support, some resort to living on the streets or turning to deviant behavior as a form of refuge in the absence of viable reintegration paths.

2. Post-Carceral Social Labeling as a Matrix of Recidivism

Upon release from prison, women face a dramatically transformed social reality—one that differs both from life behind bars and from their pre-incarceration experience. Freed from the physical restraints of imprisonment, they are quickly confronted by new symbolic constraints: the stigmatising social label of the "former prisoner." As Becker (1963) argues in *Outsiders*, deviance is not inherent in an act but is rather the result of society's labeling processes. The label of "prison woman" (*mte' hbousset*) becomes a fixed social identity that continues to shape these women's lives after their release.

All of the women interviewed in this study reported facing intense social rejection. This rejection manifests through strained family ties, difficulty reintegrating into domestic spaces, being viewed as morally compromised, and encountering systemic barriers to employment. The stigmatization they endure undermines their ability to secure dignified work and to engage in conventional social roles such as marriage and motherhood.

In the absence of social support, the street often becomes a space of last resort. Several women admitted that they had turned to prostitution to survive, highlighting the failure of reintegration programs and the lack of institutional support. In some cases, this led to their re-incarceration—often for crimes more severe than those that led to their initial sentence. Such trajectories underline how the post-carceral stigma operates as a matrix of recidivism, pushing vulnerable women further into cycles of marginalization and social abandonment.

Conclusion:

The gendered nature of Tunisian incarceration, explored in this research, points us toward the profound social effects that go beyond the material deprivation of liberty. Gender, class, and social expectations intersect at the core of the punitive experience of incarcerated women, revealing that their imprisonment is not just a legal sanction but also a social stigma. As the analysis clearly establishes, the rupture of familial and community ties is not merely a loss of social support but rather an internal social death that places women in a state of permanent marginality within their communities. This can be theorized according to Goffman's (1963) theory of total institutions and spoiled identities, where prison acts not only as a space for physical confinement but as an institution for the complete reconfiguration of the social self.

For women, this is particularly violent in that it not only involves the rupture of their moral and social identity centered around familial roles.

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Moreover, the social labeling process created by Becker's (1963) labeling theory is crucial to understanding the post-release trajectory of these women. Becoming an "ex-prisoner" extends beyond the formal boundaries of the criminal justice system, becoming a global marker of deviance that spreads across various spheres such as employment opportunities and interpersonal relationships. This social shame is both a cause and an effect of the structural exclusion these women experience, maintaining a carceral continuum that extends punishment beyond the prison system. This cycle of exclusion and marginalization can be explained through Bourdieu's (1986) theoretical model of social capital and symbolic violence, where the erasure of familial and community ties renders women invisible both within their local social worlds and within broader societal structures. The lack of access to reintegration programs or economic opportunities further exacerbates this exclusion, as women are likely to be confined to the informal and precarious economy, with an increased vulnerability to recidivism.

This also contributes to feminist theories of punishment and deviance, particularly those of Carlen (1983) and Chesney-Lind (2006), who argue that the experiences of female delinquents are shaped not only by their interaction with the criminal justice system but also by broader patriarchal systems that construct the morality and social position of women. These moments illustrate how incarceration functions as a gendered social control device, grounded in maintaining traditionally normative ideas about femininity and sexual propriety. The term "mte3 h̄bousset" serves as an instrument of social exclusion, a process that aligns with Foucault's (1977) concept of disciplinary power, where social control operates not only through formal institutions but through everyday practices of surveillance and normalization. This analysis suggests that the Tunisian penal system, like most systems, operates on a gendered double standard: women are punished not only for committing crimes but also for violating deeply entrenched gender rules. This reality calls for a sociological analysis of penal policy that takes into account the specific ways in which gender and social marginalization converge to produce gendered sanctions.

In the future, research must advocate for an intersectional prison reform model, adapted to gendered power relations. Structural changes are needed that offer women real reintegration opportunities. All these reforms must prioritize women's needs, address the social stigma they face upon their release, and challenge broader societal prejudices that contribute to their marginalization, thus fostering a more restorative and equitable justice approach.

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