



# *The impact of prison on female relatives*

*and the effects  
on their human rights*

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**



**RIMUF**

Red Internacional de Mujeres Familiares  
de Personas Privadas de la Libertad

International Network of Female Relatives  
of People Deprived of their Liberty



## Presentation

The experience of having a family member deprived of their liberty<sup>1</sup> is devastating. From the moment of arrest, families face substantial changes in their daily lives; their organization is reconfigured, their economy worsens, their bonding and emotional relationships are altered. **The effects produced by prison are multiple and serious:** They affect the subjectivity and autonomy of detainees, but also extend beyond the walls, directly impacting families and **especially women.**

This study is part of the work carried out by the **International Network of Female Relatives of People Deprived of their Liberty (RIMUF)** since 2021. The network, led by women, is made up of organizations of relatives and people who have been deprived of liberty from the Latin American and Caribbean region, together with an organization from Catalonia, Spain.

As organizations, we understand that the **production of information** is essential for the **visibility** and **recognition** of **female relatives** in government and feminist agendas. We are convinced that States must continue advancing in the adoption of comprehensive protection measures for these women and that the first step is to listen to what happens to them when the machinery of the penal system is activated

---

<sup>1</sup> Our imprisoned relatives are men and women.

---

# About the study



**188**

**Female  
Relatives**

*8 countrys*

Although there are many and varied analyses about prisons, very few account for the **magnitude of its effects in the lives of female relatives**. Therefore, with the aim of collecting their experiences, a simple survey tool was designed to address issues that up to now have not been investigated. Through a survey that combines open and closed fields, **188 responses were obtained from female relatives from eight countries: Argentina, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Spain, Mexico, and Peru**. Although the survey provided data by country, we have carried out a comprehensive analysis since this study confirms that the effects of imprisonment on women are similar, regardless of nationality, language, culture or religion.

The study that we present condenses multiple dimensions of the **impact of imprisonment on the lives of women** and is the result of the reflections and questions that the member organizations of RIMUF ask themselves: **How long will women continue to serve a functional purpose in a cruel system, and at the same time, be overlooked by governments? What about their health? What types of violence are they subjected to? What should women take care of? Who cares for those who care?**



*Care tasks are not a choice but the result of at least two contemporary processes that reinforce each other: the patriarchal society and the carceral system.*

---

*For the elaboration of the survey and the writing of this study, we start from a gender perspective*

This theoretical-political position implies a relational perspective that starts from the premise that violence, discrimination and inequalities are not necessarily natural, while seeking a more egalitarian horizon between genders.

The female relatives are the ones who are in charge of financially and emotionally supporting the incarcerated person, and in parallel, they take charge of the care of the children and the domestic chores. They are the ones that must make daily activities compatible with the demands of prison; those who prepare again and again to go to visit their love ones in prison. For these women, **care tasks are not a choice but the result of at least two contemporary processes that reinforce each other:** on the one hand, the social order on which the **patriarchal society is based**, and on the other, the **carceral system**.

*people  
deprived of their  
liberty* **1** *imprisoned*

---

**5** *in their immediate  
family environment*

**In looking at the numbers, we estimate that each person deprived of their liberty has at least five people in their immediate family environment.** Taking into consideration only the countries that participated in this study (Argentina, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Peru and Spain), we observe that in recent years **governments have imprisoned approximately 660,913 people.**

**660.913** **imprisoned people**  
in the 8 countrys of the study

**3.304.563** **people impacted by the penal  
system**  
majority women

**Therefore, the universe of people impacted by the penal system amounts to 3,304,563.** Of this number, **the vast majority are women.** Also, if we consider two children and adolescents for each person detained, we can estimate that of this total, **at least 1,321,826 are children and adolescents.**

---

**1.321.826** **children and adolescents**

## Who are the female relatives and what do they do

between

**18/74** years old

women on this study

The women who participated in this study are **between 18 and 74 years old**: 22% are between 18-28; 33% between 29 and 39; 34% between 40 and 55; and 11% between 56 and 74 years.

gender of the  
imprisoned people

**88%** relatives of a man  
**12%** relatives of a woman

**88%** are relatives of a man deprived of liberty, and **12%** of a woman deprived of liberty.

Regarding the **kinship bond** with the detained person, **couples** have greater participation since they represent **54%**; followed by **mothers** with **26%**, and **sisters** with **12%**. The remaining 7% is distributed among daughters, nieces, aunts and friends.

**54%**

Couples

**26%**

Mothers

**12%**

Sisters

**7%**

daughters, nieces,  
aunts and friends

**86%** have children

---

Of the 188 women surveyed, **86% have children: 39% have children under 16 years of age, 27% older than that age**, and the remaining **34% have children in both age groups**. This study shows that, on average, **for each woman there are 2 children under the age of 16 in her care**. Another fact to highlight is that **34% take care of children** who are not their own

**39%**

children under 16

**27%**

children older 16

**34%**

children in both age

**34%**

take care of children who are not their own

---

**2** children under 16 (their own and others)

---

close family environment

We estimate that **each person in prison has at least 2 children under 16 years of age (including their own children and others) that are part of their close family environment.**

## Dimensions of the impact of prison on women's lives

85%

work outside home

33%

start working

with the arrest of their family member

The patriarchal order on which our societies are organized operates by reproducing gender stereotypes that place women as the main people responsible for caring for other people. In addition, the role of assistance or care is reinforced by prison dynamics that force them to take care of the detainee's subsistence.

Family women take care of **the household economy**: 85 % say that they work outside the home and 33% had to start doing it with the arrest of their family member.

31%

had added more hours or taken on new jobs

Another 31% indicated that they had added more hours or taken on new jobs to increase their income. Of the women interviewed, 65% are the main source of income. However, 87% say that they do not make ends meet, while 90% say that they do not receive any state aid.

women from the imprisonment of a loved one

65%  
main source of income

87%  
do not make ends meet

90%  
do not receive any state aid



**73%**  
work doing  
housework

---

**70%**  
take care of their own  
and other children

---

Besides working outside their homes, **73% of women work doing housework** and, in almost the same proportion, **70% take care of their own and other children**. These caregiver responsibilities, which occupy a large part of the day, are vital and women do not receive a salary or remuneration for them.

**80%** visit their  
imprisoned  
relatives

---

Added to this are **visits to prisons: 80% referred to visiting and 50% indicated that it takes between 2 and 3 hours just for the one-way trip to the prison.**

one-way trip  
to the prison

**50%**  
between 2 y 3 hours

---

**And what do women carry when they go to prison?: 52% bring food, 53% hygiene items, 38% clothing and 21% medicines.** Although these elements should be guaranteed by the State through the prison authorities, **women are forced to be providers and responsible for the subsistence of the incarcerated person.**

**52%**  
food

---

**53%**  
hygiene items

---

**38%**  
clothes

---

**21%**  
medicines

---

**38%**

*deal with making claims or demands related to the detention*

**38%**

*carry out the administrative procedures related to the case*

In addition, **38% of women deal with making claims** or demands related to the detention and **38%** carry out the **administrative procedures** related to the case.

**49%**

*no longer go to the parish or participate in other social activities*

**30%**

*have stopped visiting other relatives*

**27%**

*have abandoned their studies*

Faced with the number of activities that women carry out on a daily basis, they were asked **what were the activities that they stopped doing since their family member was arrested?** **49%** responded that **they no longer go to the parish or participate in other social activities;** **30%** have **stopped visiting other relatives;** and **27% have abandoned their studies.**

**38%**

**do not talk to anyone** when they feel overwhelmed

So, we have been able to measure the overload of responsibilities that falls exclusively on female relatives and also identify what they have had to give up. Particularly worrisome are the situations of **distancing regarding family and social ties**, either as a consequence of the excessive workload or because **they are relatives of people in prison. 38% responded that they do not talk to anyone when they feel overwhelmed. Prejudice regarding prison is an unavoidable fact that falls heavily on women and also on children.** Many of them prefer **not to talk** about the arrest; while some distance themselves from others with whom they have close ties. In any case, **the women end up being alone, with contradictory feelings that range from guilt and shame, to injustice and desolation.**

**79%**

*of the children  
know about the arrest*

**80%**

*of the women were  
in charge of telling the news*

**That is why telling children** the news of imprisonment is something so complex for women. Of the total number of women who mentioned having or caring for children, **79%** indicated that **they know about the arrest**; of that total, **80% were exclusively the ones who were in charge of telling the news**. The women who have not told their children about the arrest say that they have not known **how and what to say**, or they **believe** that the news would cause them **sadness, depression, anger or fear**.

about their treatment  
by penitentiary  
personnel

**85%**  
*bad, lousy or regular*

**What types of violence do women suffer?** Consulted about their **treatment by penitentiary personnel for admission to prisons, 85% stated that it is bad, lousy or regular**. These figures, clearly serious, do not fully reflect what women really face when visiting their relatives. The section on prison practices on women's bodies and the implications for their self-esteem and dignity is made up entirely of first-person testimonies. **On a daily and systematic basis, women** are treated as suspects and suffer the arbitrariness of the prison system. **They are exposed to different types of gender violence; violence perpetrated by state officials**.

would have wanted to  
denounce the violence  
suffered during the  
searches

**67%**  
*would have wanted*

**32%**  
*did not dare*

**29%**  
*did not know where*

**27%**  
*did not want to report*

Added to this is the inability to defend themselves: **67% would have wanted to denounce the violence suffered during the searches, but they did not**. Of those, **34 % said they did not dare** and **29% said that it was because they did not know where to do so**, while **27% did not want to report** the mistreatment and humiliation.

treatment of the  
judicial institutions

**41%**

*regular*

**17%**

*bad*

On the other hand, the judicial institutions are not places where women receive support regarding the violence suffered by them and their relatives in prison: **41% indicated that the treatment is regular** and **17% that it is bad**. **40% report that they do not understand what judicial officials explain to them**. Added to the mistreatment and violence carried out by state institutions is social discrimination: **75% of the women indicated that they had felt discriminated against for being a relative of a detained person**.

**75%**

*had felt  
discriminated*

Added to the mistreatment and violence carried out by state institutions is social discrimination: **75% of the women indicated that they had felt discriminated against for being a relative of a detained person**.

after the arrest  
of their family  
member

**82%**

the health of women  
relatives  
**got worse**

When we ask ourselves who cares for those who care, we ask about the **health** of women relatives: **82% indicated that their general health got worse with the detention of their family member** and **66% consider that their physical and mental health should be attended by a professional**. **86% indicated that before the arrest they had regular medical check-ups, which they stopped doing**. **55% affirm that they have some health problem or disease**.

**86%**

**had regular medical  
check-ups**  
before the arrest of their  
family member

**66%**

**consider that their  
physical and mental health**  
should be attended  
by a professional

**55%**

*affirm to have some  
health problem or  
disease*

---

**85%**  
mental and  
emotional health  
reported being worse  
after the arrest of their  
family member

---

Regarding **mental and emotional health after the arrest, 85% reported being worse.** Stress, nerves, feeling overwhelmed and sadness appear as the main causes. Constant worries and fear for the well-being of their relative, anxiety and depression emerge in their stories.

*Imprisonment has a direct impact on the bodies of women who experience it, taking an enormous physical and emotional toll.*

**56%**  
does not know their  
situation  
in gynecological terms

---

Regarding **gynecological check-ups, 56% of women do not have regular annual check-ups.** Access to sexual and reproductive health services and other general check-ups are essential to prevent prevalent diseases in women. That is why they must have access to comprehensive health care in order to prevent incarceration ending up devastating their own lives.



It is very common that women in their daily lives do not ask themselves what they need to be healthy, nor do they have a moment to remember when was the last time they had a medical check-up, since there are always other things to resolve.

*The demands of prison are many and fall on women's shoulders. The dedication that they display in caring for other people is detrimental to their own care.*

## *The value of the organization of female relatives*

In order to get through the experience of a loved one's incarceration, it is vital to have the support of other people. **It is in the organization of relatives of people deprived of liberty that women can find understanding, warmth, accompaniment and, also, tools for self-defense and struggle.** Family associations transform the traumatic experience of confinement into a collective effort: they are not isolated people who suffer, it is not just their particular case, rather millions of people are subjected to a despotic, totalitarian and illegitimate institution. It is by recognizing that the struggle is collective and accumulating many years of learning, that the RIMUF members organizations began to forge unbreakable ties and assume the need to strengthen themselves as a network.

*This report is the product of listening, of meetings between women, of joint work between organizations, and of the recognition of the essential value of one's own experience.*



The fight for the human rights of people deprived of liberty and their families transcends borders, crosses limits and implies speaking different languages. At **RIMUF** we hope that this report will be useful for reflecting on the effects that prison produces beyond its walls. The experience of the incarceration of a loved one especially impacts the lives of women regardless of country, culture or religion.

“


*“Since the arrest you have been a mother, a psychologist, a provider, a doctor, a fellow student, a judicial agent and at one time an investigator. Obviously without stopping working, being a housewife, a wife, a specialist in finding the cheapest prices, and so many other things... as if women were designed for care. But paradoxically, many of us leave our own care last.”*

Mother, Argentina, 46 years old

”

At the end of the report, we provide a series of recommendations for governments, relevant bodies and society in general, so that they can learn about and address an invisible reality.





*From RIMUF we want to thank all the women who shared their experience of having a family member deprived of liberty. Without them and their voices this study would not be possible.*

---

This document was written by **Paula Casco**, Professor of Anthropological Sciences and **Laura Maccarrone**, Graduate in Sociology.  
Collaborated in data processing **Sebastián Aquila**, Graduate in Sociology.

Graphic Design: Mariano Mantiñan

---

*To read the complete study and learn more about RIMUF, you can visit:*

***[www.rimuf.org](http://www.rimuf.org)***

“The organizations that make up RIMUF”

**ACIFaD** **Asociación Civil de Familiares de Detenidxs, de Argentina:** It is an organization made up of female relatives of people deprived of liberty and professionals from different disciplines with almost 15 years of experience. It provides legal advice and psycho-social support and produces essential information regarding the female relative's role in the prevention of torture and the violations of rights inside the prison, which allows RIMUF to engage in advocacy at local and regional levels.

**FPU** **Familia Penitenciaria Unida, de Costa Rica:** Created at the end of 2019, this organization provides psycho-social support to families and legal advice seeking to guarantee the rights of persons deprived of liberty and their families. It also seeks to influence public policies for the recognition of the collective of all families.

**Amparar** **Asociación de Familiares y Amigxs de Presos/as, de Brasil:** Created and based in São Paulo in 2004, it is an organization with extensive experience. Its actions, focused on accompanying family members, include providing legal and social assistance and promoting the defense of rights of people who are victims of state violence whom they understand as survivors of the system, including people detained and their families.

**Mujeres Libres** **de Colombia:** Founded in Bogotá in 2018, this organization is led by women who were once incarcerated and their relatives. The organization works to promote economic autonomy and physical, mental and emotional well-being with the purpose of guaranteeing women's rights, for those who left prison and for the ones still imprisoned.

“The organizations that make up RIMUF”

### **AZO** Azul Originario, de El Salvador:

Created in 2015, the organization works with a focus on comprehensive human rights, providing psychosocial support and seeking social transformation based on the commitment of institutional mechanisms that guarantee access to justice for persons deprived of liberty and their families.

### **CAIFAM** Centro de Atención Integral de Familiares con Personas Privadas de la Libertad, de México:

The Center of Attention for Relatives of People Deprived of Liberty was created in 2018 with the support of the organization Documenta. It is a meeting space in which relatives share their experiences and build alliances in order to strengthen their abilities to be self-managers of their own processes.

### **Comité de Familiares por la Justicia en Cárceles**

**de Ecuador:** This organization based in Guayaquil, Ecuador, was founded at the beginning of 2022 with the accompaniment and local support of the Permanent Committee for the Defense of Human Rights of Guayaquil and RIMUF. It demands better prison conditions for persons deprived of liberty and measures of reparation for the families who lost a loved one in the

### **Familia de presos**

**de Cataluña, España:** Created in 2016, the organization brings together people deprived of liberty and their relatives, with the purpose of creating a network of mutual accompaniment and overcoming the distances imposed by prison. Made up of family members and professionals, it provides legal advice and psychosocial support.

Member organizations



With the support of:

