Article

Beyond the Prison Wall: Experience of Motherhood after Incarceration in Ethiopia, A Descriptive Phenomenological Study

by

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Abstract

In Ethiopia, the impact of imprisonment on motherhood remains significantly under-researched, despite motherhood being central to Ethiopian cultural identity. This study adopts a descriptive phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of nine formerly incarcerated Ethiopian mothers. The findings illuminate their struggles with societal stigma, poverty, and fractured family dynamics, alongside their resilience and commitment to rebuilding maternal bonds. Central to the study are the implications for social work practice. The results emphasize the urgent need for culturally sensitive, trauma-informed support programmes to assist mothers in overcoming stigma, and successfully reintegrating into their communities. Key recommendations include the development of gender-responsive, community-based initiatives to address the psychological, economic, and relational challenges these mothers encounter. Vocational training, parenting education, and advocacy against discriminatory practices are identified as critical tools for social workers to promote sustainable reintegration. The study also highlights the limited availability of non-custodial measures in Ethiopia, underscoring the detrimental effects of incarceration on maternal roles and child wellbeing. Drawing on global frameworks such as the Bangkok Rules, it advocates for non-custodial alternatives and restorative justice approaches, particularly for mothers with dependent children. This research contributes to global social work knowledge by situating the experiences of Ethiopian mothers within broader discussions on reintegration and motherhood. It underscores the importance of incorporating diverse cultural perspectives into social work practice, policy, and research, thereby advancing a more inclusive understanding of post-incarceration challenges.

Keywords: criminal justice system, Ethiopia, incarcerated women, motherhood, qualitative approach

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Introduction

Motherhood in Ethiopia, as in much of Africa, holds profound cultural, spiritual, and social significance. It transcends a mere familial role to become a cornerstone of societal continuity, symbolizing lineage preservation and the transmission of cultural heritage (Nourse, 2021; Mochache et al., 2020; Crivello et al., 2019; Tefera et al., 2017). Ethiopian mothers are esteemed for their self-sacrifice and unwavering dedication, and they are expected to prioritize their children's needs above their own (Crivello et al., 2019). This idealization of motherhood imposes immense pressure on women to embody perfection in their maternal roles, an expectation that is often unattainable. For incarcerated mothers, this ideal becomes fraught with complexities.

Globally, there has been a 50% increase in female prisoners since 2000, compared to a 20% increase in male prisoners (World Prison Brief Report, 2017). Ethiopia, the second most populous country in Africa with 120 million people (World Population Review, 2022), has approximately 110,000 prisoners across 120 regional and six federal prisons, of whom 4.2% are female (World Prison Brief Report, 2017). This figure excludes women detained in police stations, military camps, administrative units, and rural areas (Human Rights Watch, 2013). Most female prisoners are mothers of dependent children (Alemineh et al., 2022), typically single mothers with custody of their children (Gobena & Hean, 2019). Consequently, childcare falls predominantly on these women, who often lack support to care for their children during- and after their incarceration (Gobena & Hean, 2019). Upon returning to the community, these mothers face significant social adjustment issues within the family and society. Studies indicate that incarcerated Ethiopian mothers fear re-entering society due to discrimination and inadequate support (Alemineh et al., 2022). However, there is a noticeable gap in understanding their lived experiences post-prison in Ethiopia. This gap is attributable to the marginalization of individuals with criminal records, intensified by the high societal value placed on motherhood; those who ‘fail’ by being incarcerated are often deemed of little value (Zerihun et al., 2021). Consequently, the voices of these mothers are silenced.

The socio-political landscape of Ethiopia has historically compounded these issues, particularly for women detained for political reasons. Under both past and present

governments, politically motivated detentions have been prevalent, resulting in significant psychological trauma and prolonged family separations (Amnesty International, 2016). These women often return to communities where stigmatization, government surveillance, and ostracization hinder their reintegration, making it difficult to resume their roles as mothers and community members (Amnesty International, 2016).

Compared with many Western nations, where structured re-entry programmes, legal protections, and social-service safety nets help formerly incarcerated people resume family and community life (Edwards et al., 2022), Ethiopia offers almost no systematic post-release assistance (Zerihun et al., 2021). Scarce public resources and the absence of a coordinated governmental framework leave mothers to negotiate re-entry largely independently (Zerihun et al., 2021). Although social workers could play a pivotal role in filling this gap, the profession itself is under-resourced, and its potential contributions remain under-examined (Wako & Gebru, 2020).

Further, most empirical work to date centres on the Global North, documenting how stigma, economic precarity, and social exclusion impede incarcerated mothers' return to family life, while also demonstrating the mitigating effect of formal support systems (Baldwin, 2018). By contrast, there are few studies on the Global South and virtually none on Ethiopia, although distinct socio-cultural and economic dynamics shape women's post-incarceration trajectories there.

Cross-cultural comparison makes these differences stark. In Western settings, although some problems like stigma remain, welfare benefits, housing assistance, and family-centred re-entry programmes help offset the material and relational costs of imprisonment (Baldwin, 2018; Celinska & Siegel, 2010). Ethiopian women, however, confront a 'triple bind': limited institutional aid, a persistent cultural narrative that equates incarceration with moral failure, and community norms that stigmatize the entire family (Zerihun et al., 2021; Gobena & Hean, 2019). As Crenshaw (1991) argues in her concept of intersectionality, overlapping axes of oppression, gender, poverty, and the normative ideal of motherhood, produce compounded forms of marginalization. In Ethiopia, where motherhood is culturally idealized as self-

sacrificing and morally exemplary (Crivello et al., 2019), imprisonment brands women as failed mothers, and magnifies exclusion from work, housing, legal aid, and even their extended families (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022; Amnesty International, 2016).

These intersecting vulnerabilities also determine whether global gender-responsive guidelines, such as the UN Bangkok Rules (2010), can be translated into meaningful practice. Without locally adapted, culturally sensitive, and adequately funded interventions, such frameworks have limited traction in patriarchal, low-resource contexts (Edwards et al., 2022). Consequently, any attempt to design or evaluate re-entry services for Ethiopian mothers must adopt a culturally attuned, intersectional perspective that foregrounds stigma, poverty, and gender in equal measure to inform effective social-work engagement and policy reform.

Research Contribution

Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by adopting a phenomenological approach to examine the lived experiences of Ethiopian mothers transitioning to motherhood after incarceration. By providing a platform for these often-neglected narratives, the research aims to illuminate the complexities of their re-entry journeys. It explores how these women navigate the intersection of motherhood, incarceration, and societal reintegration within the Ethiopian context, shedding light on the socio-cultural and economic factors that shape their experiences. The insights garnered from this study aim to inform social workers, criminal justice professionals, and policymakers about the nuanced needs of these women. Recognizing the importance of culturally sensitive support, the study underscores the necessity for localized, effective re-entry programmes that address the realities of Ethiopian society. It highlights the critical role social workers can play in facilitating reintegration, advocating for resource allocation, and developing support networks tailored to these mothers' unique circumstances. By situating the experiences of Ethiopian mothers within the broader discourse on re-entry and motherhood, this study contributes to a more inclusive understanding of post-incarceration challenges. It emphasizes the imperative to incorporate diverse perspectives from the Global South into global discussions, thereby enriching social work practice and policy development aimed at supporting formerly incarcerated mothers worldwide.

Methodology

As delineated by Giorgi (2009), phenomenology is the study of human experience, focused on how individuals perceive and interpret their lived realities. While phenomenology is rooted in philosophy, it has increasingly been recognized as a rigorous research method within qualitative inquiry (Giorgi, 2009). Within phenomenology, the descriptive phenomenological approach emphasizes the careful description of phenomena as they are experienced, rather than offering explanations or interpretations. This methodology requires beginning from a perspective free from hypotheses and preconceptions, consciously setting aside the researcher's assumptions, a process known as epoché or bracketing, to uncover novel insights into the phenomena under investigation (Giorgi, 2009). This approach is particularly relevant when researching sensitive topics or marginalized groups, such as mothers who have been incarcerated.

Negative societal attitudes towards mothers who have been in prison often render these individuals marginalized and challenging to access for research purposes. They are frequently hidden, and may be perceived as non-existent within mainstream society. Consequently, adopting a descriptive phenomenological methodology allows the research to privilege and honour the voices and narratives of these mothers, ensuring their experiences are authentically represented.

Moreover, descriptive phenomenology facilitates the generation of rich, nuanced descriptions of individuals' experiences, enabling these to be understood and illuminated in novel ways (Langdridge, 2007). By focusing on the essential general meaning structures of the phenomenon, referred to as the 'essence' and 'constituents', researchers can uncover insights that extend beyond the specific cases under study. As Todres and Holloway (2010:178) assert, such an approach emphasizes 'what we have in common as human beings', thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the universal aspects of human experience. In selecting descriptive phenomenology as the methodological framework, this research aims to delve deeply into the lived experiences of mothers who have been in prison, capturing the essence of their experiences without imposing preconceived theories or interpretations. This approach is not only methodologically robust but also ethically

significant, as it empowers a marginalized group by giving them a voice within academic discourse.

Sample

A purposive sampling approach with maximum variation was adopted (Langdridge, 2007). This involved selecting women who all shared the common experience of the phenomenon of being mothers released from prison. Within this group, maximum variation was ensured by recruiting women of different ages, marital statuses, education levels, and geographical locations (Dahlberg et al., 2008). Ensuring maximum variation helped to uncover those aspects of the experience of motherhood that vary across perceptions, and those that remain consistent or invariant (Langdridge, 2007).

Achieving maximum variation can be challenging in practice, particularly with underserved groups such as former prisoners. Many former prisoners conceal their incarceration history and often change their living arrangements due to discrimination and marginalization in society (Gobena & Hean, 2019). In Ethiopia, there is no systematic mechanism to track the lives of offenders after their incarceration (Zerihun et al., 2021). Non-governmental organizations primarily carry out such work, but the programmes and services they offer are limited and inadequate. Consequently, participants were recruited through gatekeepers and snowballing. The use of gatekeepers is recognized as essential for accessing such groups (Andoh-Arthur, 2019). Gatekeepers included the Ethiopian Federal Correctional Administration, a lecturer from Addis Ababa University, the non-governmental organization ‘Prison Fellowship’, a political party, and trusted individuals such as a pastor.

Women were included in the study if they had experienced incarceration, were mothers, and understood Amharic (the official language of Ethiopia). Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, the use of interpreters was deemed inappropriate. A total of nine participants from diverse demographic backgrounds were included in the study. For protection and confidentiality, each mother was assigned a pseudonym (Table 1). As the focus was not on the crime that led to imprisonment, information about the nature of the offences was not sought.

While the use of gatekeepers was essential to access this hidden and stigmatized population, it also introduced potential biases. Participants recommended by gatekeepers may have had more positive relationships with the referring institutions, or may have been more willing to engage, potentially excluding individuals who were more traumatized, isolated, or distrustful of systems. To mitigate this limitation, snowball sampling was used alongside gatekeeper referrals to diversify the participant pool and reach women outside institutional networks.

Table 1: Biographical details of the mothers

	Pseudonym	***Age***	***Education level***	***Children***	***Marital status***	***Geographical location***	***Time of release***
1	Selam	35	Higher education	3	Married	Addis Ababa	2 months ago
2	Askale	50	High school	3	Divorced	Addis Ababa	1 year ago
3	Demitu	52	Higher education	4	Married	Amhara region	2 years ago
4	Nardos	35	High school	1	Divorced	Oromia region	4 years ago
5	Rahel	35	No formal education	5	Divorced	Oromia region	7 months ago
6	Hana	38	Primary school	2	Widowed	Oromia region	4 years ago
7	Azeb	25	Primary school	2	Married	Oromia region	6 months ago
8	Bayush	45	No formal education	2	Divorced	Oromia region	7 years ago,
9	Alem	60	No formal education	8	Married	Oromia region	3 years ago

Data Collection

In the context of descriptive phenomenological research, interviews are unstructured, and include an 'experience-near question' that invites participants to share concrete descriptions of the chosen phenomenon (Giorgi, 2009). In this study, the interviewer posed the following question: *'I am interested in hearing about your life as a mother after prison. Could you please tell me what it is like to be a mother after you leave prison?'*

During the interviews, follow-up questions were asked based on the women's responses. Because the interviews were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic (between September and November 2020), the in-depth interviews were a mixture of face-to-face (n=7) and telephone (n=2). They lasted approximately one hour, and were conducted in Amharic and recorded. Given the sensitive and potentially

traumatic nature of the topic, steps were taken to ensure the psychological safety of participants during interviews. Before each session, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Interviews were conducted in safe, familiar settings chosen by the participants. They mostly selected a quiet corner of a familiar public space, such as a community church, so they could speak freely while both their privacy and the physical safety of everyone present were maintained. The researcher, who shares the same cultural and linguistic background as the participants, created an empathetic and trusting environment to encourage open dialogue. Emotional cues were monitored throughout; if distress surfaced, the session was paused, breaks were offered, and the interview rescheduled or terminated if requested.

Ethics and Rigour

This research received approval from the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (Sikt).

The focus on formerly incarcerated mothers, a group often facing marginalization, highlights the importance of informed consent. Exploring their past experiences can unintentionally provoke emotional and psychological discomfort, as it involves revisiting traumas and past incidents, particularly those linked to their time in prison. Such recollections might evoke feelings of shame, guilt, or painful memories of separation from their children, among other distressing experiences. With an awareness of these potential issues, the study's informed consent procedure was designed to mitigate them. Participants were thoroughly briefed in Amharic about the research project and their rights. The consent process utilized both written and verbal methods, accommodating interviews conducted either in person or via telephone.

Confidentiality was a critical component of informed consent. Participants were assured that while the interviews would be recorded and transcribed, any excerpts used would be anonymized to ensure their privacy and security.

Analysis

Some of the Amharic terms used by the participants were culture-specific (bound) and challenging to translate into English. Therefore, the analysis was conducted in the original language, and then translated into English. The interview data were analysed using Giorgi's three-stage descriptive phenomenological method (Giorgi, 2009). First, the data were transcribed verbatim, and each transcript was read to gain a feel for the full description of the individual's account. Once a sense of the whole had developed, the transcripts were divided into smaller 'meaning units' for a more thorough analysis. This involved re-reading the entire transcript from the beginning, and each time a shift in meaning occurred, a mark was noted in the written transcript. From a psychological perspective, and mindful of the phenomenon being researched, a meaning unit was determined whenever the researcher experienced a transition in meaning (Giorgi, 2009). This continued until all the raw data were broken down into meaning units. In this process, a phenomenological attitude was crucial; that is to say, a willingness to put aside one's perspective, referred to as 'bracketing', and see the phenomenon with fresh eyes, being open to what had not been seen before (Giorgi, 2009). Bracketing concerns not letting previous knowledge about the phenomena influence the current analysis of the experience (Giorgi, 2009). This bracketing process was challenging because the researcher had to be consciously aware, and not influenced by previous knowledge about the experience and the findings from the literature review. The researcher had to deliberately put aside their knowledge and bias to create space for new insights and a new perspective on the phenomenon of motherhood after imprisonment throughout the data analysis.

Finally, the participants' accounts of their experiences were transformed into phenomenologically sensitive expressions to reveal the essence of their motherhood experiences. This step is central to the phenomenological attitude (Giorgi, 2009). It involved returning to the beginning of the description that had been divided into meaning units. Each meaning unit was then examined to identify psychologically sensitive expressions, and see how the life-world description of motherhood could be more appropriately expressed. Participants' life-world expressions were then transformed into expressions that highlighted the psychological meanings they experienced. This requires free imaginative variation, i.e., dwelling on the

transformed meaning unit to identify the participant's psychological meanings and make implicit factors explicit.

The trustworthiness of the data was established by paying attention to the development of trust between the researcher and the mothers (Morrow, 2005), which resulted in these women sharing private, honest, and in-depth information that reflected their lived experiences of motherhood after prison. The fact that the interviewer was conducting the study in her country, came from a similar cultural context, spoke the same language, and was a woman helped to build rapport and trust with the participants. A clear formulation of the research journey was recorded, shared with the authors, and discussed. As the authors are of various nationalities, translating the analysis process from the original language into English facilitated conformity, communication, and discussion among the research team.

Findings

The analysis of the nine in-depth interviews produced six constituent structures of the phenomenon of motherhood from the perspective of formerly incarcerated mothers in Ethiopia.

The Constituents

Constituent 1: feeling frustrated and fearful of the lack of opportunity and inability to support their children.

The first constituent identified the mothers' frustration and fear resulting from the lack of opportunities and their inability to provide for their children. They expressed feelings of impoverishment and discrimination, perceiving that society judged them, and that their identities as individuals and mothers were overshadowed by the broader negative societal perception of them as criminals. This perception made them feel worthless and inadequate. Although the mothers felt they had made amends for their past mistakes, they believed that society still felt threatened by their presence. They perceived that this discrimination left them with few available opportunities, and hindered them from obtaining employment that would enable them to support their children:

> It is very difficult to find employment after prison due to the stereotypes that society has toward former prisoners. (Selam)

The lack of employment opportunities and poverty forced some mothers into financial dependence on their adult children and family members. Although they felt confident in their work skills and possessed the necessary motivation to work, they were frustrated by their inability to find a job or start a business due to discrimination. This dependency and inability made them feel fearful and inadequate as mothers facing the pressures of daily life:

> I currently don't have a job, and I am waiting for my children to pay the bills. I did not find a job. I had nothing when I came back. Being dependent on my children pisses me off. The thing is that I can do anything. I just don't have the means and money. And that makes me feel helpless and insufficient. Thinking about that makes me frustrated. (Rahel)

Additionally, some participants felt that motherhood itself and its associated responsibilities limited their employment options:

> A kid is like a rope. It ties you to where you are, and you can't be as you please. If it weren't for my kids, it would be easier to move around and consider other workplaces. I could even try to go abroad and work, but I couldn't. (Bayush)

Constituent 2: feeling of guilt and shame

The second constituent identified the mothers' feelings of guilt and shame when facing their children. For most participants, incarceration had a negative impact on their lives and their roles as mothers during and after imprisonment. Some described their prison experience as 'hell' and 'unbearable'; some felt suicidal and considered taking their own lives due to feelings of guilt, regret, and shame:

> When I was in prison, I tried to commit suicide, but it was the officers who stopped me, (Askale)

This sense of guilt arose from having missed important events in their children's lives due to their incarceration, which they felt had negatively impacted their children:

> I have missed the most important days of my children's lives. I can honestly say that my children's lives were ruined because of my being sent to prison (Demitu)

> I think of everything in my past, and I wonder what I would have done if I wasn't in prison, what I would be doing for my children, and how I would not be waiting on my children's support. (Rahel)

> I can honestly say that my children's lives were ruined because of my being sent to prison. (Demitu)

For a few participants, the guilt and shame stemmed from the menial work they felt compelled to undertake to provide for their children. They felt ashamed and worried

that their children might be embarrassed by them for taking low-paid jobs, feeling that they were hurting their children's feelings:

> I feel ashamed for working as a daily labourer at a construction site. I am sure my children also don't like it. (Azeb)

Constituent 3: maternal self-sacrifice

The third constituent identified maternal self-sacrifice, involving the relinquishment of their own needs in the interest of their children's well-being. They felt that their children must take precedence over all other aspects of their lives. The mothers did not regret or resent this sacrifice and, in fact, wished they could do more:

> I have given my life entirely to my son once I came back from prison. I can't put the amount of sacrifice I pay for him. I rather do something for him than for me because he always comes first in my life. I do not think I did enough for him, but I am trying as a mother. (Nardos)

Although most participants spoke of the self-sacrifice often inherent in motherhood, their experiences were perceived and embodied differently. Some described their experience of sacrifice as taking on the pain, disappointment, frustration, and emotional turmoil that accompany life after prison. To protect their children from distress, they preferred to suffer in silence rather than burden their children, sacrificing their own need for support to promote their children's happiness and mental stability:

> I am keeping my sickness from my kids because, as a mother, I should be keeping it to myself in order not to worry them. (Rahel)

> Well, the thing is, I make sure my children do not see how much I am hurting. Because I know it would hurt them. I keep things to myself. (Demitu)

Other participants embodied their sacrifice through their renunciation of a second marriage or a commitment to remaining single. For them, life after prison became increasingly complicated; they feared that another person might not want to take responsibility for their children. For these reasons, they preferred to raise their children alone. For these mothers, keeping their children safe came first – before their happiness or needs as a woman:

> Well, how many men came asking for my hand? But what if I got married and the man turned out to be a bitter stepfather to my kid? So, I refused to get married. You do a lot for your kids. And I will stand by this for my kids' sake. (Bayush)

The final expression of sacrifice relates to two participants with a history of political imprisonment. These participants have been actively involved in Ethiopian politics for an extended period, which has led to their imprisonment on multiple occasions due to

their political beliefs. During their incarceration, they endured violations of human rights and were denied due process of law, as well as access to rehabilitation services—a privilege afforded to other prisoners. Despite all the challenges these mothers experienced, they both believe that all the sacrifices they have made through their participation in politics have been for democracy, freedom, and a better country for their children. They believe that sacrificing their freedom and struggling for justice is part of their role as mothers, which makes their experience unique. They want their children to live in a more just and democratic country, so that they can reach their full potential without fear or intimidation:

> And now, while trying to be a mother, I am also fighting for my country. Unless you make sure you leave a country better than it is right now, their lives won't change in any way. Basically, live the same life I did. So, trying to build a country everyone can peacefully live in, where my children can have a better life. (Demitu)

Constituent 4: feeling a need to rebuild the fractured relationship with children and compensate for lost time

The fourth constituent identified the mothers' feeling of a need to actively work to rebuild or repair the fractured relationships with their children. Most mothers interviewed felt that the mother-child relationship was negatively affected by their incarceration, especially when the children did not enter the prison with them. They believed this resulted in a loss of trust from their children because they had left them. For this reason, some participants noticed behavioural changes in their children—they became overly clingy, distrustful, withdrawn, and suspicious. The mothers felt that their children lived in constant fear of losing them again due to their previous incarceration and separation:

> And when I left to come to see you, my 14-year-old came with me. Yes. He does not trust me; none of them do. (Rahel)

> Well, my daughter is now not sure that I will always be around. She thinks that I would just get up and leave. Every time I leave the house, she asks if I am staying for long or what time I will be back. And that made her want to get closer to her father than me because I once left and did not come back for a while. (Selam)

Mothers who experienced their children's mistrust wanted to improve their mother-child relationship. Yet, many mothers expressed that this was hard work, painful and complicated. Despite these challenges, they were determined to mend the fractured relationship now that they were out of prison. The mothers felt they must compensate for the lost time. All they thought about was how to give their children a better life –

be it food, clothing, emotional support, or whatever they wished for – to help them forget the misery and time spent apart:

> He suffered with me for eight years, and I do all this hoping that he forgets the prison time. It might be for his meals, clothing, school, or whatever he asks for. I am trying to make up for my absence. (Nardos)

Constituent 5: feeling responsible to act as a guide and positive influence in the lives of their children.

Mothers feel responsible to act as a guide and positive influence to steer their children in the right direction. Although they did not see themselves as good role models due to their incarceration history, the mothers felt a strong sense of responsibility for influencing their children positively:

> I tell my son to be patient about things, and he listens to me. I try to teach him what life is all about from my own experience and that of everyone around us. (Nardos)

> Teach them not to steal or take drugs. All I want is to keep my son from everything wrong. (Hana)

Although most of the mothers were not highly educated, they strongly believed in the power of education. All the mothers interviewed wanted their children to be educated and successful. For the participants, being a mother means striving to be a positive influence, and seeing all the possibilities in the world through their children's eyes:

> So, I tell them to live to be sufficient for themselves. 'Learn and get somewhere' is my usual message for them. I don't want them repeating my life. (Bayush)

Constituent 6: seeing the children as a source of happiness and courage

The final constituent of motherhood identified is mothers seeing the children as a source of happiness and courage. Despite the many challenges, the mothers said that there was nothing in the world that compared to motherhood; it was incomparable and irreplaceable. They felt that their children were a source of their happiness and courage, without which they could not imagine life. They felt that the time they spent with them was extraordinary and believed that their children were a gift from God. The mothers identified having a second chance to be a mother as one of the greatest and most indescribable feelings of happiness in their lives:

> Happiness, what else? What if I was alone by myself if they weren't around? Money is nothing to me. It makes me happy that they are here. (Hana)

> Doing all that for my son…I can't put it in words; it makes me very happy… (laughing) (Nardos)

> I lost three children consecutively; I gave birth to these two children after coming here in '95. No one else was with me except them. Because I was punished by the death

> of children…. (cries), these two children are my only hope. Who else do I have? These kids mean the world to me. I have no mother, no father, and no sister. It's just them and God. I lift my head up and see God. And when I return my eyes to the earth, I see my kids. (Bayush)

The Essence of Motherhood after Prison in Ethiopia

The core of the descriptive phenomenological method is to elucidate the phenomenon's essence, i.e., the aspects that are invariant across specific situations (Giorgi, 2009). Distilling the content of the six constituents leads to the conclusion that *the essence of motherhood after incarceration in Ethiopia involves* wanting the best for their children, and seeing them as a source of happiness and courage. It means embracing the self-sacrifice that the role requires while also worrying about their ability to support their children, given their poverty and experiences of discrimination by Ethiopian society, including in the labour market. It is a complex experience that interweaves their feelings of inadequacy with the fear and frustration of not being able to care for their children.

In addition, the mothers constantly feel guilty and ashamed of the time they were separated from their children and wish they could have done things differently. Now that they are out of prison, they want to rebuild their fractured relationships and compensate for their previous absence and lost time, even though the process is complicated. As a result, the mothers strive to positively impact their children's lives, despite not feeling like adequate role models, in the hope of preventing their children from following the same path. Ultimately, it is about giving their children a better life, and meeting their needs to help them forget the misery and the time of separation.

Discussion

The narratives of formerly incarcerated Ethiopian mothers broaden the literature on motherhood by revealing both culturally specific and universal dimensions of maternal identity. Like the 'idealized mother' described by Hays (1996), the women in this study embraced self-sacrifice, aspired to guide their children, and drew strength and joy from them. Their accounts resonate with wider Ethiopian norms that frame motherhood as personal fulfilment and meaningful service to family (Crivello et al., 2019). Similar patterns have been observed among incarcerated mothers in the United States, who likewise prize their maternal role and remain deeply invested in

their children's lives (Allen et al., 2010). Taken together, these findings underscore a shared human experience (Todres & Holloway, 2010): Despite differences in life circumstances, culture, and geography, mothers often conceptualize and value motherhood in comparable ways. Recognizing these commonalities invites us to view incarcerated mothers not only through the lens of their criminal histories, but as women whose experiences of mothering align with those of mothers everywhere.

Despite aspiring to the culturally celebrated ideal of the 'good mother' (Hays, 1996), women exiting Ethiopian prisons encounter a set of interlocking constraints that disrupt their efforts to meet those expectations. Goffman's (1990) classic analysis of stigma helps to illuminate why: Social labelling situates the formerly incarcerated mothers' identity in direct opposition to the moral status traditionally bestowed on mothers. Three dimensions of stigma (*enacted*, *felt*, and *courtesy*) simultaneously challenge their reintegration.

Enacted stigma is most visible in the labour market. Many mothers in our study said that employers treated a criminal record as an automatic disqualifier for employment, a pattern that has been shown elsewhere. In the United Kingdom, two-thirds of convicted women lost their jobs after sentencing (Stewart, 2008); in Ethiopia, 74% of people released from prison spent almost a year searching for work (Zerihun et al., 2021). For these mothers, unemployment did more than cut income, it undermined their ability to fulfil the 'provider' and 'caregiver' roles expected from Ethiopian motherhood. Here, Goffman's insight that stigma is a social process of opportunity denial becomes concrete. Joblessness hurts all returning offenders, but its effects are magnified for mothers, who must also support and nurture their children (Baldwin, 2018; Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Despite this added burden, mothers are largely left to navigate re-entry alone. Reintegration services depend heavily on NGO charity, and receive little legal or financial backing from the government (Zerihun et al., 2021). Where services do exist, they seldom address women's specific needs, and lack effective follow-up at both federal and regional levels (Zerihun et al., 2021; Gobena & Hean, 2019).

Felt stigma is the internalized sense of society's disapproval that surfaced in mothers' narratives of guilt, fear, and perceived inadequacy. Many described themselves as

unworthy of their children's affection. These accounts extend Goffman's concept of stigma, showing how incarceration compounds an already fragile sense of identity. A related challenge was remorse over a prolonged separation from their children. Most participants felt the relationship had deteriorated, and that they had lost their children's trust, leaving them insecure and inadequately cared for. This finding echoes research on parent-child separation during incarceration, which documents an abrupt disruption of the maternal role, insecure attachment in young children, and post-release bonding difficulties (Baldwin, 2018; Briggs-Gowan et al., 2019; Lockwood, 2018; Murray & Murray, 2010). Insecure attachment, marked by fear and uncertainty, typically arises from volatile caregiving, leading children to view parents as unreliable (Abdul Kadir, 2017). Given the harm that extended separation inflicts on both mothers and children, these results reinforce calls to reconsider custodial sentences for women with dependent children. The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) (2021) has also emphasized the need for legislative changes, and recommended protecting the right of female prisoners (especially mothers) to bail so that they can conduct their trials outside the prison as far as possible.

Courtesy stigma reaches the next generation. Although the participants in our study did not describe children being mocked or bullied for having a 'prison mother,' other studies show that family members of the stigmatized experience secondary shame (Gobena et al., 2022). This transmission of stigma potentially amplifies the mothers' distress, and protecting children from social harm becomes yet another domain in which they may feel they are failing. If re-entry initiatives focus only on skills training or job placement, they overlook a deeper, cyclical problem. In short, our findings corroborate Goffman's claim that stigma is a 'social process of exclusion'; they also show that motherhood and incarceration intensify both the stakes and the reach of that process. Combating this loop requires interventions at different levels, an issue we return to in the implications for social work section.

In summary, like other mothers, women leaving prison in Ethiopia want their children to thrive. Unlike other mothers, they re-enter a society and a system stacked against them. These challenges may inadvertently lead them back to prison and promote recidivism. Therefore, addressing situational challenges such as employment and discrimination, as well as fostering a healthy mother-child relationship after

incarceration, will further promote desistance – a process by which people come to cease offending behaviour – and sustain the cessation (Maruna & Farral, 2004). A study also shows that employment, children, and intimate family relationships are among the most important motivating factors for change among incarcerated individuals (Celinska & Siegel, 2010)

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The findings from the current study underscore universal maternal hopes, yet highlight challenges rooted in Ethiopia's socio-political landscape (no national reintegration policy, under-resourced social welfare, and entrenched stigma). Addressing them requires a pragmatic, context-sensitive social-work response. In addition, global frameworks such as the Bangkok Rules (UNODC, 2010) offer a blueprint for gender-responsive, non-custodial alternatives, but their realization in Ethiopia is still limited. Localization is crucial; partnerships with community organizations, faith groups, and women's self-help associations, trusted, resilient pillars of Ethiopian society, can embed reintegration support where formal services fall short.

Navigating Motherhood Post-Political Incarceration

An in-depth analysis of imprisoned mothers in Ethiopia reveals unique experiences, especially among those incarcerated for political affiliations. Two participants, imprisoned due to their involvement with opposition parties, exemplify a political struggle aimed at securing a just society for their children's future. They perceived their imprisonment as an extension of their maternal duties, aspiring to create a world where their children might flourish free from fear and coercion. However, their political resistance incurs significant costs; ongoing government surveillance impedes their access to services, and forces them to balance political activism with personal and familial safety. This restriction adversely affects their maternal roles and ability to provide for their children, setting them apart from other prisoners.

Conversely, mothers incarcerated for non-political offences, such as economic crimes or personal conflicts, face different challenges, including societal distrust and discrimination. Often less educated, as indicated by participant demographics, these women struggle more with societal reintegration than their politically active

counterparts. Unlike the politically detained mothers who take pride in their democratic efforts, those imprisoned for other reasons bear the weight of societal judgment for their past actions. This stigma not only affects societal interactions, but also strains their relationships with their children.

Despite differing circumstances, both groups grapple with redefining their maternal identities post-release. Common challenges include the emotional burden of separation, missed significant family moments, and efforts to reconnect with their children. These personal accounts illuminate Ethiopia's complex social, political, and economic landscape. Each narrative, with its unique hardships, reflects the enduring spirit of motherhood amid adversity. These women perceived their incarceration as a sacrifice made on behalf of their children and community, framing it as an extension of their maternal identity and civic duty. This can be understood through ‘a **resistant motherhood lens’**, wherein motherhood becomes a site of political struggle and agency (Vilches & Pulkingham, 2021). Their stories reflect not only personal resilience, but also the broader dynamics of political suppression, gendered resistance, and maternal activism in authoritarian settings (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022; Amnesty International, 2016).

The findings suggest that the distinct experiences of these Ethiopian mothers are shaped by living in a poor and non-democratic country, where women can be imprisoned for political beliefs. This context sets their post-release challenges apart from those faced by mothers in the USA and the UK (Gobena et al., 2022). The convergence of these experiences underscores how socio-economic, political, and geographical contexts influence mothers' realities post-incarceration. Recognizing these intersectional influences is crucial for a comprehensive understanding, and for developing interventions tailored to the unique challenges these mothers face in different settings. Moreover, the specific nature of the political imprisonments of these two participants, although from a small sample, may help shed light on broader issues and stigmas associated with motherhood after incarceration. These perspectives highlight the need for further investigation to fully comprehend these complex issues.

Implications for Social Work Practice and Recommendations

Professionals in social work play a pivotal role in safeguarding the rights of marginalized individuals, such as formerly incarcerated mothers (Patterson, 2019). Collaboration with criminal justice experts and other professionals is essential to identify appropriate rehabilitation services for offenders, and to support affected families.

Micro-level

At the individual level, formerly incarcerated mothers often face challenges in rebuilding relationships with their children, and may feel inadequate in their parenting roles. Mentoring programmes and parenting training can provide essential support. Mentors and advocates can assist mothers in navigating complex systems that affect them and their children. Additionally, adopting a trauma-informed approach is crucial to help children who exhibit behavioural changes like mistrust and withdrawal due to mother-child separation (Hines et al., 2020). Professionals should routinely assess traumatic events, use culturally sensitive, evidence-based treatments, reduce exposure to secondary traumatic stress, and focus on building resilience (Hines et al., 2020).

Mezzo-level

Community-based programmes that support neighbourhoods working with these women, and connect them to necessary services, can mitigate societal discrimination (Gobena et al., 2022). Such programmes can aid mothers in finding employment and engaging in micro-enterprises, considering that they are often the sole providers for their children. Support should enable these women to explore factors leading to their incarceration, including multiple exclusions, family histories and experiences of abuse, to understand the cycles that led to crime. Gender-specific programmes are beneficial, as they address unique experiences of women, such as motherhood and caring responsibilities (Edwards et al., 2022). These programmes should create environments reflecting women's realities in the criminal justice system, and address their specific challenges and strengths.

Macro-level

Systemic changes are required to address the challenges these mothers face, including preventing women from entering prison through non-custodial measures at all stages of the criminal justice system. The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for Non-Custodial Measures (Tokyo Rules, 1990), and the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders (Bangkok Rules, 2010), advocate for such shifts. Alternatives to pre-trial detention should consider gender, for instance, by accounting for childcare responsibilities in bail or house arrest conditions. Utilizing non-custodial measures can reduce imprisonment's social and economic costs, lower prison populations, and decrease recidivism rates.

Restorative justice programmes offer another solution by addressing discrimination and stigma post-imprisonment, by helping people who have offended make amends and regain social membership through forgiveness, acceptance and reconciliation, in line with the UN *Basic Principles on the Use of Restorative Justice Programmes in Criminal Matters* (2002). Victim-offender mediation, for instance, obliges the offender to acknowledge guilt, compensate the victim and demonstrate tangible behavioural change, outcomes that, as Menkel-Meadow (2007) notes, empower both parties and reduce recidivism. Ethiopian communities have long practised their own variations of these principles; councils of elders '*shimglina*' in the north, broker apologies '*yikkirta*', and symbolic compensation that publicly restores the wrongdoer's standing (Alemneh, 2023); the Oromo *Gadaa* system asks elected age-set leaders to supervise restitution circles that conclude in '*nagaa'* (renewed peace) (Dulume, 2023). Because such rituals unfold in full view of family and neighbours, communal pressure often sustains the agreement and discourages relapses, turning wrongdoing into an opportunity for individual growth and collective cohesion. By weaving these indigenous practices into formal social-work interventions, partnering with elders as co-facilitators, and recognizing customary rites as valid markers of rehabilitation, professionals can offer reintegration plans that feel culturally authentic while still meeting international standards. Embedding elements on customary law, conflict ritual and decolonizing theory in social-work curricula would equip practitioners to draw ethically and skilfully on local wisdom (Gobena et al., 2024),

helping women and other stigmatized groups rebuild their lives, secure employment and contribute positively to their communities.

Furthermore, criminal justice professionals and social workers should focus on what is meaningful to the rehabilitated individual, and not merely on their needs. The study indicates that, despite challenges, mothers are motivated to provide for their children's physical, emotional, and spiritual needs, sharing perceptions similar to mothers without criminal convictions. The Good Lives Model, responsive to offenders' interests, abilities, and aspirations (Purvis et al., 2011), alongside a strengths-based approach (Healy, 2014), can encourage mothers to leverage positives that give their lives meaning. This involves building strong family and community ties, recognizing their worth, fostering hope and self-efficacy, and gaining a sense of purpose (Maruna & Farrall, 2004).

For mothers incarcerated due to political reasons, professionals must adopt a sensitive approach that acknowledges the specific nature of political imprisonment. These women face unique challenges, including surveillance, discrimination from authorities, and threats of re-imprisonment. Understanding the socio-political context leading to their imprisonment and its impact on their well-being is crucial. Beyond basic services like mental health counselling, family reunification assistance and financial advice, social workers should also address human rights, social justice, and political advocacy.

Implications for Policy

This research also highlights policy considerations. In Ethiopia, there is currently no post-incarceration/reintegration policy, according to the Office of the Federal Correctional Administration. New policies must be developed to help released offenders to reintegrate successfully. This paper shows that mothers (like many ex-prisoners) have difficulties finding employment, and their struggle is particularly acute since they have dependent children. Policy measures must, therefore, be taken to address the discrimination that has led to fewer employment opportunities for this group. This could take the form of investment in employment programmes such as education, training and tax relief. In addition, policies must holistically address the

life-course issues that influence women's pathways to crime in the first place. Usually, incarcerated women commit crimes related to economic problems and poverty in Ethiopia (Gobena & Hean, 2019). Therefore, investing in educational opportunities, and equal participation in the labour market for girls and women, is crucial to preventing their involvement in illegal activities.

Limitations

It can always be argued that there are methodological limitations. This study does not seek generalizability in a quantitative sense, as phenomenological research aims to understand and elucidate the universal essences of common experiences in the lifeworld of individuals (Dahlberg et al., 2008).

Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted experiences of motherhood following imprisonment in Ethiopia. Employing a descriptive phenomenological method, it illuminates the complex narratives of fear, poverty, discrimination, sacrifice, shame, happiness and hope that characterize these mothers' journeys. The research highlights significant obstacles they face, particularly limited employment opportunities and persistent poverty, and delves into the unique challenges those imprisoned face for political reasons.

To address these issues and support these mothers in their crucial childcare responsibilities, collaboration among social workers, criminal justice professionals, governmental bodies and non-governmental organizations, is essential to develop gender-responsive and culturally sensitive (drawing on indigenous knowledge) post-prison support programmes. Proposed initiatives include mentorship, parenting training and community-based services that connect mothers with necessary resources. The study also advocates for implementing non-custodial measures and restorative justice principles within the criminal justice system to facilitate better social integration and improve employment prospects. The pivotal role of interprofessional collaboration is emphasized in these efforts.

Furthermore, the paper calls for a compassionate approach by social workers and criminal justice professionals, recognizing the specific challenges associated with political imprisonment. It highlights the need for a new policy to address the issues faced by women with histories of incarceration, noting the current absence of a reintegration policy in Ethiopia. Such a policy would be instrumental in tackling the unique challenges these women encounter.

Finally, while this study offers valuable insights into the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated mothers in Ethiopia, some limitations must be acknowledged. First, the small sample size, though consistent with the goals of phenomenological research, limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Second, participant recruitment relied mostly on gatekeepers, which may have introduced selection bias by excluding women who are more marginalized or disconnected from institutional or community networks. Lastly, as with most qualitative research, the findings reflect the subjective experiences of participants within specific socio-cultural and political contexts, and should be interpreted as exploratory rather than representative. Future research should expand sample diversity, include longitudinal approaches and explore institutional, political and policy responses more directly to inform systemic reforms.

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