

## Incarcerated Mothers: Oppression and Resistance

Eds. Gordana Eljdupovic and Rebecca Jaremko Bromwich.  
Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2013.

REVIEWED BY JOANNE MINAKER

Most women in the world's prisons are mothers. Mothering is a context of incarcerated women's lives, so understanding women *as prisoners* and *as mothers* allows for a nuanced analysis of motherhood and criminalization. When physically separated from their children through incarceration a mother's "mothering contexts" become no less real. This spatial and symbolic divide makes mothering fraught with challenges and uncertainty for both mother and child(ren). *Incarcerated Mothers: Oppression and Resistance*, edited by Gordana Eljdupovic and Rebecca Jaremko Bromwich, is a collection devoted to the "lives, needs and rights of women who are, or have been, incarcerated" (1).

Incarcerated mothers break from dominant constructions of crime and motherhood. The cultural construct of motherhood as nurturance, support, and care contrasts the masculinist structure/culture of dominance within prisons. Challenging the myth of criminalized women as "bad mothers," Eljdupovic and Bromwich, along with twenty-five contributors, aim to treat incarcerated mothers with dignity, focusing on all mothers' need for "support, respect, autonomy and empowerment." *Incarcerated Mothers* situates mothering by women who end up incarcerated in the context of their lives at the margins. The authors bring a central claim of contemporary feminist criminology to motherhood studies; that is, women in prison betray their gender when they break the law and go against social cultural scripts for women.

The collection is timely and relevant. Women are the fastest growing prison population and, Canada is mirroring global trends with legislative agendas prioritize massive incarceration over investments in social services. Women who simultaneously occupy parent and prisoner status face a myriad of obstacles, not the least of which is the barrier criminalization presents for maintaining or transforming relationships with children. The book begins and ends with work by incarcerated women themselves, framing an academic analysis with self-expressions from women in prison – first in photography and lastly with poetry (21). The first page is a photograph of three-year-old Amber Joy embracing her mother, Patricia Block. Block writes: "The day at the hospital when I had to kiss my baby goodbye was the most helpless, miserable, and empty experience of my life. I often asked why was she be-

ing punished for something I did?” This emotive starting point underscores an invisible relationship—the hidden impact of a mother’s incarceration on her child(ren). Eljdupovic and Bromwich state that incarcerated mothers are “doubly stigmatized” or “double odd”—they are in jail, like men, *and* they are *not* (as social expectations dictate) providing daily care to their children (1).

The book is structured in two sections: 1) Incarcerated Mothers in Context: Social Systems and Inequality, and 2) Lived Experiences of Incarcerated Mothers. Section One includes contexts like child protection/child welfare (e.g. used to detain adolescent mothers) and covers social, cultural and political contexts (i.e. implications associated with incarcerating Aboriginal mothers in Canada, and how patriarchal colonization continues for Indigenous Australian mothers. The common thread is underlying marginalization that keeps racialized and economically disadvantaged mothers locked away, making prison their “home.” The feminization of poverty, abuse, lack of educational opportunities or life sustaining employment, power imbalances, among other issues that women-quo-women disproportionately confront dramatically impact women caught up in processes of criminalization.

Part Two includes the story of the mother-child program in a B.C. women’s prison and an analysis of the impact of social and criminal justice policies on mothering and relationships. This section highlights the lack of supportive environments and social structures that characterize (incarcerated) women’s lives but also a politics of resistance, hope and resiliency. Living conditions they face and inadequate social supports make criminalization a pathway more likely for single mothers, women of colour, and women at the economic margins.

From care and respect in multigenerational prisons in Portugal to the plight of incarcerated mothers in India, *Incarcerated Mothers* covers much ground and delivers on its aim to attend to “the marginality, poverty, abuse, and other systemic inequalities in social contexts experienced by incarcerated mothers” (23). The editors state: “Marginalized and unsupported circumstances only deepen and intensify upon incarceration, when women ‘re-enter’ the ‘society,’ or more precisely, when they re-enter, the criminogenic margins of society they lived in prior to incarceration” (22). The book is essential reading for those whose life or work intersects with incarcerated mothers and/or children with incarcerated parents. I commend the authors’ attempts to unite two important conversations about motherhood and criminalization. Feminist criminology has long called out the contradictions and the systemic issues that exacerbate women’s troubles. If women leaving prison are to become integrated within their communities, they need social inclusion, which involves stable housing, quality childcare, health care, and education and employment opportunities.

Rich in description and breadth of content, *Incarcerated Mothers* has room to deepen the analytical scope. Problematizing the tensions between oppression and resistance (and better clarifying the concepts) would allow for more about “what is done to mothers in and by these systems” and “the agency of the mothers themselves, their resistance and values that are of high importance to them” (11). Eljdupovic and Bromwich extend Andrea O’Reilly’s idea of “Mother Outlaw” as a way to “bridge the gap” between incarcerated and many other mothers (21). There is room left to explore a link between empowered mothers as “ideological outlaws” and incarcerated mothers as “legal outlaws.”

Constrained choices are found in all mothering contexts but are particularly salient for incarcerated mothers whose decisions about how they mother and meet their child(ren)’s needs are inextricably bound in the social spaces in which their lives are embedded, structured by race, gender, class and other inequalities. Shame of letting others down may be shared among mothers, yet a freedom *some* of us find in letting go of the cultural myth of the “perfect good mother” by embracing a maternal role on our own terms, as “outlaw,” may be less likely for incarcerated moms, ironically. Eljdupovic and Bromwich argue: “when women from the margins do mother, they place value on themselves and on children that the society in which they live has deemed unworthy of investment” (6). Stories about “Other” mothers challenging mainstream discourse on parenting and gender justice may help to shift the social devaluation of incarcerated mothers and their children. In response to women’s oppression a new paradigm where we support amelioration through stable and caring communities for all mothers and children over criminalization holds promise for social justice.

## **Reproducing the British Caribbean: Sex, Gender and Population Politics After Slavery**

Juanita De Barros.

Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2014.

REVIEWED BY RACHEL O’DONNELL

Juanita De Barros’ new text on the politics of reproduction in the Caribbean’s post-slavery period, *Reproducing the British Caribbean: Sex, Gender, and Population Politics after Slavery*, traces the gendered and racialized policies that resulted from ideas surrounding population, reproduction and individuals in