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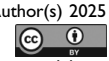
European Journal of Criminology

'You no have to treat me with your hate': The needs and experiences of female foreign national prisoners in an Irish prison

European Journal of Criminology
1–23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Abstract

Female foreign national prisoners (FFNPs) are a distinct cohort of prisoners with specific experiences and characteristics. These women not only experience the gendered pains of imprisonment but also endure the additional challenges associated with being a foreign national prisoner. Yet although these women suffer multiple layers of disadvantage, little is known about the critical problems that define the daily lived experiences of FFNPs during their imprisonment. This article aims to open up these areas of inquiry in an Irish context and examine the needs and experiences of 13 FFNPs residing in the Dóchas Centre – Ireland's sole operational female-only prison at the time of this study. The article begins by grappling with the complexity of defining power, agency, adaptation and resistance in prison before outlining the methodology of the qualitative study. It then presents the key challenges encountered by this cohort of FFNPs in six parts: language challenges, information provision, religious practice and expression, family relationships, inmate–peer relationships and staff–prisoner relationships. Drawing on theories of power, agency, adaptation and resistance where appropriate, the paper explores the distinct ways in which the power of the institution is experienced by these FFNPs and negotiated with corresponding forms of adaptation and agency. The article also addresses the unresolved spectre of resistance and concludes

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that the Irish Prison Service need look no further than the Bangkok Rules in order to alleviate the 'highly gendered' pains of imprisonment for this cohort of 'forgotten' prisoners.

Keywords
Agency, female foreign national prisoners, Ireland, language, relationships, religious expression and practice

Introduction

Female foreign national prisoners (FFNPs) are a distinct cohort of prisoners with specific characteristics and experiences (Prison Reform Trust [PRT] and Hibiscus Initiatives, 2012; Tomaszewska et al., 2023). Analogous to other women who are confined far from their homes in prisons often primarily designed and organised to suit a male majority (Carlen, 1983; Girardi, 2024; Quinlan, 2011), these women not only endure the gendered pains of imprisonment (Crewe et al., 2017) but also experience the additional burdens associated with being a foreign national prisoner (FNP) (Richards et al., 1995: 201; Schliehe, 2018). These challenges encompass, but are not limited to language barriers, a lack of information in a language that they understand, difficulties in maintaining ties with family overseas, experiences of discrimination and racism, as well as difficulties negotiating the prison regime (Bhui, 2004; HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2006; Matos, 2016; PRT and Hibiscus Initiatives, 2012). Although it has been emphasised in the scholarly literature that women in prison – including foreign national women – are a cohort likely to be the main carers of their children (Corston, 2007; Gerstein and Johnson, 2000; PRT and Hibiscus Initiatives, 2018) and overwhelmingly characterised by socioeconomic deprivation, poor mental and physical health and histories of abuse (Corston, 2007; Crewe et al., 2017; Irish Penal Reform Trust, 2023), little is known about the critical problems that define the daily lived experience of FFNPs while incarcerated (PRT and Hibiscus Initiatives, 2012).

This article aims to open up these areas of inquiry in an Irish context and examine the needs and experiences of 13 FFNPs residing in the Dóchas Centre – Ireland's sole operational female-only prison at the time of this study. The article begins by grappling with the complexity of defining power, agency, adaptation and resistance in prison before outlining the methodology of the qualitative study. It then presents our findings in six parts: language challenges, information provision, religious practice and expression, family relationships, inmate–peer relationships and staff–prisoner relationships. Drawing on theories of power, agency, adaptation and resistance where appropriate, the paper explores the distinct ways in which the power of the institution is experienced by these FFNPs and negotiated with corresponding forms of adaptation and agency. The article also addresses the unresolved spectre of resistance and illustrates the ongoing empirical challenges – both in definition and measurement – while simultaneously demonstrating the core adaptations embraced by these FFNPs in order to cope with their incarceration. The article concludes that the Irish Prison Service (IPS) need look no further than the Bangkok Rules (2010) in order to alleviate the 'highly gendered' pains of imprisonment for this cohort of 'forgotten' prisoners (Girardi, 2024; PRT, 2004).

The complexity of defining agentic acts in prison

Power remains central to prison life and is experienced in multi-faceted ways by the diverse cohorts of people in prison. Bearing this in mind, this article builds on existing theoretical contributions that have developed and enhanced our understanding of women's imprisonment (Foucault, 1977; Scraton et al., 1991; Sykes, 1958). Early studies focused on how patriarchy and social control – which women are subject to outside of prison – permeate their prison experience, resulting in intensified oppression and power in prison (Carlen, 1983; Dobash et al., 1986), but a more recent body of criminological scholarship has challenged representations of the passive female inmate with little agency and explored how women in prison, as agential subjects, can negotiate power and exert greater control over their conditions and engage in resistance (Bosworth, 1996, 1999; Carrabine, 2005; Shaw, 1992). While studies of male resistance tend to focus on collective acts such as prison riots (Carrabine, 2005; Scraton et al., 1991), the scholarship on women in prisons has increasingly concentrated on more personal, intimate acts of resistance. These practices may take the form of ostensibly trivial acts, such as challenges to dietary provisions or codes of dress, which represent assertions of subjective identity whether feminine, racial or ethnic (Bosworth, 1996, 1999; Bosworth and Carrabine, 2001; Esposito et al., 2020).

The concept of agency has recently been described as two-fold in the sense that it can affect one's sense of self and disempower individuals (Girardi, 2024), while resistance has traditionally been defined as the negotiation of the restrictions of imprisonment and attempts to resist institutional control (Bosworth, 1996). In this context, it has been argued that incarcerated women use their presentation of self (identity) (Bosworth, 1996) to resist oppression and negotiate power relations through different aspects of identity including gender (femininity), sexuality, culture, race and ethnicity (Bosworth, 1996, 1999; Bosworth and Carrabine, 2001; Esposito et al., 2020). As Rubin (2017: 139) put it, 'the *act* of resisting is seen as a victory (against the prison regime) by representing the limits of discipline, power, and oppression'. The agency/resistance framework has proven to be a valuable 'lens through which to analyse the voices of the marginalised groups in the prison system' (Tomaszewska, 2016: 22), but one must be careful not to portray every act of agency in prison as resistance (Rubin, 2017) and polarise women as either victims or resisters (Crewe et al., 2017; Fili, 2013). In fact, it has been claimed that the glorification of resistance has not only influenced the turn towards self-governing, empowerment and responsibilisation regimes (Carlen, 2002; Hannah-Moffat, 2001) but also activated additional forms of custodial power as well as exacerbating stereotypical views of women in prison (Carlen, 1983; Dobash et al., 1986; Hannah-Moffat, 2001; McCorkel, 2013; Quinlan, 2011; Scraton and Moore, 2005).

This more recent body of critical scholarship has led to an appreciation that while resistance does exist, most personal, intimate, agentic acts undertaken by women in prison (currently labelled as resistance) can also be conceptualised in various other ways. This, of course, is not to suggest that 'prisoners do not engage in practices that contest or challenge the system' (Girardi, 2024: 15). Still, it has been observed that acts are sometimes labelled as resistance due to their subversive potential rather than

the resister's intentions (Rubin, 2015). Other terms such as performative agency (Quinlan, 2011), tactics (Mahey et al., 2019; Rowe, 2016), friction (Rubin, 2015) and therapeutic or pleasure-inducing acts (Chamberlen, 2016) or pleasure-inducing acts (Vasiliou, 2020) have also been adopted in the literature to conceptualise how women in prison utilise agency to manage social needs, but certain terms like friction and tactics require some disruption to prison life (Rubin, 2015) or a 'ruse' or manipulation undertaken for a certain end (Mahey et al., 2019; Rowe, 2016). This article does not, of course, suggest that these studies are less valuable for adopting such terms. Rather, the findings of this study demonstrate that the agential acts embraced by the participants in this study were not necessarily a 'ruse' or disruptive, but merely attempt to adapt and cope in prison.

Methodology

Our analysis draws on semi-structured interviews conducted with 13 foreign national women in the Dóchas Centre (Mountjoy Prison Complex, Dublin). At first glance, the number of participants in this study may appear to be relatively small, but such an assumption is challenged when the number of interviewees is placed in a statistical perspective. On 30 November 2020, the IPS snapshot statistics revealed that there were 12 FFNPs in Irish prisons, while exactly 12 months later, there were only nine FFNPs detained across the entire prison estate (IPS, 2023). Put otherwise, the sample in this study, albeit small, is fairly representative of the FFNP population in the Republic of Ireland.

The participants were recruited by teachers in the Dóchas Centre, and the interviews were facilitated by the IPS. Information sessions were held with all teachers in advance of recruitment to outline the aims and scope of the research. These sessions also afforded the research team the opportunity to explain the ethical and methodological implications of the study and address any potential issues that might arise in the recruitment phase. As gatekeepers, IPS required reassurance that our agenda was not sensationalist or malicious, while teachers were specifically chosen to recruit participants due to the trust that they hold among the prisoner population. In other words, teachers provided reassurance to potential interviewees that the authors were genuinely supportive of ameliorating the conditions endured by FNPs in Irish prisons, while in the absence of direct recruitment, the support of teaching staff across the prison estate was crucial in laying the foundations for engaged interviews. Most of the interviews were conducted in person, but a small number were carried out via the IPS online calling facilities with the assistance of professional interpreters. This software is secure and is currently used by inmates for private calls with legal representatives and family members. Careful consideration was also given to the vulnerability of these offenders and the interviews were carried out in line with international best practice and as sensitively as possible. Particular emphasis was placed on understanding and empathy while simultaneously recognising the power dynamics involved (Quinlan et al., 2022).

Ten of these interviews were conducted with the women in a private classroom. Confidentiality remained a key concern throughout due to the fluid and often imperfect nature of data collection in prison. Every effort was made to ensure suitable privacy,

including private rooms and secure video call locations, while peer translators were only accommodated at the request of individual participants. Ethical approval was granted by Maynooth University Social Research Ethics Subcommittee, and research approval was secured through the IPS Research Committee's formal written submission application and ethics process. As per agreement with local management in the respective prisons, the authors were accompanied to the prison school by officers and participants were escorted on the premise of a professional visit. However, six women – who wished to participate but were unable to speak English – were assisted at their request by two fellow prisoners of shared nationality and/or language who acted as informal interpreters. The decision to incorporate such an approach was justified on the grounds that it reflected the existing practice of FNPs utilising fellow prisoners as ad hoc translators. This, of course, is not peculiar to Irish prisons (Croux et al., 2021, 2023; Iversen et al., 2013; Warr, 2016; Watt et al., 2018). The European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) reported, for instance, that FNPs in Irish prisons often had to 'rely on a translation provided by other prisoners' (CPT, 2020: 40).

There are challenges, however, to utilising peer translators within a prison setting, as they may feel pressured to take on this role. Conversely, interviewees may be vulnerable to private information being utilised against them (Watt et al., 2018), but prisoners themselves have generally viewed informal peer translators positively (Croux et al., 2023; Watt et al., 2018), and in our experience, the benefits of peer translation frequently outweighed those of formal interpretation/translation. Indeed, utilising these interpreters enabled the FFNPs that we interviewed to vocalise their concerns and afforded them the opportunity to say what they wanted to say, something that was a source of frustration for FNPs without this opportunity (Iversen et al., 2013). Furthermore, the informal interpreters were peer chosen, and therefore had prior knowledge of, and close friendships with the interviewees, creating a comfortable and non-intimidating environment where the women could speak openly with moral support. These interpreters were also able to use language that was adjusted for the women's level of understanding (Watt et al., 2018).

Till et al. (2019: 14) assert that 'broad variations in numbers of detained FNPs are observed between countries occupying traditional Western and Eastern territories', and our interviews indicate that Ireland is no exception in this regard. The women in this study came from five different countries, with an age range varying from 23 to 45 years of age. The duration of the interviews ranged from 14 to 54 minutes. These interviews were subsequently transcribed and stored on institutional servers in encrypted format (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The value and rigour of thematic analysis in 'the search for and interpretation of meanings' (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 84) is well established in the research methods literature. The FFNP transcripts were analysed using an inductive or 'bottom-up' thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), enabling us to identify the codes and merge them into themes that arose from the interviews (Patton, 1990). This flexibility, combined with insights from the literature, allowed for the development and adoption of themes, concepts and theories that complemented the qualitative findings. This approach was chosen for its pragmatism and to avoid 'rigidity' (Noaks and Wincup, 2004: 131). The themes were identified in stages, with the following six final

higher-order themes emerging from the data analysis: language barriers, information provision, religious expression and practice, family relationships, inmate–peer relationships and staff–FFNP relationships.

Findings

Language barriers

This exclusion experienced by FFNPs as a consequence of linguistic barriers not only exacerbates the existing pains of imprisonment but also generates a 'distinct and separate pain' (Croux et al., 2021). Indeed, the power that the prison holds, and the oppression of these women (Carlen, 1983; McCorkel, 2013; Quinlan, 2011), is compounded for those who are unable to speak the local language. Some of the participants in this study are thousands of miles from home, in a strange environment, unacquainted with its customs, and imprisoned in a system in which women are already marginalised and their needs unmet (Corston, 2007). As discussed at the outset, the specific challenges that female prisoners face in prison have been well documented in the criminological literature, but these are intensified for FFNPs who have minimal or limited proficiency in the language of the detaining jurisdiction. The additional burden reported by FFNPs as a result of the language barrier includes *inter alia* the inability to communicate with officers and fellow prisoners and access the necessary services and supports (Bhui, 2009; Croux et al., 2021; Iversen et al., 2013; PRT, 2004). These challenges render the experience of imprisonment more difficult for a cohort who already suffer multiple layers of disadvantage with language barriers permeating and exacerbating 'almost all the other problems faced by this section of the prison population' (Barnoux and Wood, 2013: 242).

Most of the participants in this study, nine FFNPs, specifically discussed how language barriers impacted their capacity to communicate with prison officers and fellow prisoners.[1] One interviewee, for instance, noted that she 'no speak English' and that sometimes when she wants 'to talk with the officer about something, maybe a video call, and the officer no understand what she is saying' (T6). Similarly, another participant revealed that 'nobody spoke my language, only my friends the same country from Brazil. No officers, no governor or chief' (T2). The challenges that stem from an inability to speak the language of the detaining country affected these participants' ability to access a variety of services within the prison system. One participant pointed out that she 'needed more help with family contact because of English' (T11), while another FFNP stated that she 'don't know how to write English to get a complaint form' (T3). Language clearly demarcated 'the lines of disadvantage in the prison system' (Tomaszewska, 2016: 23).

Mirroring existing research (Bhui, 2009; Doyle et al., 2022) and demonstrating the increased oppression experienced by non-English-speaking FFNPs, the inability to communicate and meaningfully participate in prison life culminated in a compounding sense of isolation among a cohort of the women interviewed for this study.[2] Prisons are often sites characterised by overcrowded populations (Crewe, 2009; Johnson, 2005) – a problem that has also characterised the Dóchas Centre in recent years (Doyle et al., 2022; Dóchas Centre Visiting Committee, 2019; Quinlan, 2011) – but a number of the

participants still reported feeling 'alone' (T6) and 'totally lost' (T11). Isolation is a feature of prison life by design, as prisoners are psychologically and physically removed from the community and confined to an environment that engenders feelings of loneliness, detachment and loss of identity (Crewe, 2009; Johnson, 2005; Philippon, 2023). However, the isolating nature of imprisonment was less apparent for FFNPs who spoke English:

> Another thing I can mention … the reason why I don't experience these things is because I speak English, you know what I mean? So, people who don't speak English, they probably … feel they get treated different way, I think. (T5)

Nevertheless, rather than accepting this isolation and oppression due to language barriers, several FFNPs demonstrated how they attempted to resist and/or alleviate this isolation and exercising agency by 'learn[ing] English in here, so it is possible to talk to these people' (T2). Similarly, another interviewee revealed that the fact that she did not 'know how to speak English' negatively impacted her educational opportunities. She reported that previously 'it was very difficult … she would stay in the room', but that she 'now understand little English' and 'start to go to school' (T13). For this participant, this was more an example of what O'Donnell (2014: 222) termed 'time work' – developing a routine to cope with boredom, accelerate time and inserting meaningful activities into a timetable not of her design – rather than a form of resistance. Analogously, other participants also stated that they 'try learn English' (T6) to enhance their participation opportunities, as a good understanding of the English language is generally required in order to participate in the activities that are offered (Brosens et al., 2015: 17; Croux et al., 2023: 41). These women framed these activities as an 'opportunity to reinvent themselves' (Philippon, 2023: 191) and a method of achieving personal – rather than institutional – goals while incarcerated (Lempert, 2016).

Echoing previous research conducted with FFNPs in other jurisdictions (Bhui, 2004; HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2006; Schliehe, 2018), a number of Brazilian participants stated that residing with prisoners who speak the same language can, at least to some extent, alleviate these feelings of isolation.[3] One interviewee, for instance, observed that 'if you have no Brazilian here, she be more lonely because the girls sometimes try communication but they can't' (T6). At the other end of the spectrum, another woman was subjected to comments such as 'English please, English please' (T8) when she conversed with fellow prisoners in their native language. For these reasons, prisoners tend to feel safer when they can reside with those who share the same language and with whom they have more in common (Phillips, 2008). These testimonies not only reveal the constant negotiation of power in the prison but also the distinct ways in which FFNPs exercise their limited linguistic agency in order to maintain their cultural identity (Bosworth, 1996) and resist their marginalised status within the prevailing prison social milieu.

Information provision

Prisoners are persistently subject to power exerted through an information deficit, but with limited capacity for informal information gathering, FFNPs are particularly disadvantaged by incomplete information and/or by the provision of information solely in a

language that they do not understand. A considerable body of research has pointed out that FFNPs are not provided with essential information about the prison regime (Bhui, 2004; HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2006; PRT and Hibiscus Initiatives, 2012) and similar findings emerged from this study. Rule 2(1) of the Bangkok Rules (2010) states that 'newly arrived women prisoners shall be provided with facilities to contact their relatives; access to legal advice; information about prison rules and regulations; the prison regime and where to seek help in a language they understand', but the majority of the women interviewed highlighted that they received no information on the prison rules or prisoner rights.[4] Turnbull and Hasselberg (2017: 140) observed that FNPs are unlikely to 'understand the penal system, their rights and even the mundane daily rules and routines of prison life' and this was borne out by a number of participants in this study. One FFNP, for instance, observed that '[the prison] don't give … information' (T3), while another woman asserted how 'when she came in the prison, [the officers] no say anything to her about prison' (T13). These prisoners, therefore, could not determine whether 'the prison rules were applied equally to every prisoner, regardless of race, culture and nationality' (Tomaszewska, 2016: 29).

Procedural justice, and by extension the legitimacy of the prison regime, is undermined when prisoners lack an understanding of the rules to which they are subject (Beijersbergen et al., 2016), and this is compounded by the fact that when such information is provided, it tends to be in the local language (Bhui, 2004; HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2006; Slade, 2015). Although Rule 551(1) of the UNSMR[5] provides that such information 'shall be available in the most commonly used languages in accordance with the needs of the prison population' and that 'if a prisoner does not understand any of those languages, interpretation assistance should be provided', two of the participants in this study observed that there was 'no translating' (T2) and 'no one understand anything' (T13). Such an absence of information in a language that they understand is a clear example of the malign effects of institutional power and practices (Bosworth and Carrabine, 2001; McCorkel, 2013; Quinlan, 2011) on FFNPs, but could also be construed as an endeavour to 'normalise the FNWPs into speaking English' (Tomaszewska, 2016: 30).

In the absence of even basic information in their own language and formal interpreters, many of the FFNPs in this study were entirely reliant on fellow prisoners in order to gain an understanding of their rights and the prison rules.[6] This was perfectly captured by one participant:

> I didn't know what my rights or the rules of the prison either. I didn't know anything. I had to find out from the other prisoners that you're not allowed to do this and that. (T5)

These findings reflected the experience of FNPs in other jurisdictions (Croux et al., 2021: 80; HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2006: 7; Iversen et al., 2013; Warr, 2016) and corresponded with the findings of the CPT delegates who conversed with FNPs on their most recent visit to Irish prisons (CPT, 2020: 40). One woman stated, for instance, that 'they have to get some help because they don't speak English' (T13), while another interviewee, who had a strong command of English and frequently acted as an informal translator, highlighted that 'it's really hard because they don't know the rules, so we help' and

'if we are not here, nobody for help' (T7). Similar sentiments were also expressed by a Brazilian FNP:

> …because when Brazilians come, they don't have English and it is very difficult. Now they have like me and others and we can go and help. But when they come, it's very difficult. (T8)

Adaptation through the use of informal translators was viewed by the FFNPs in this study as a necessity rather than a form of resistance. FFNPs negotiated the power relations in the prison and asserted their independence – particularly in relation to the lack of translated information and their inability to speak the prison's dominant language – by acting as, or utilising, an informal translator. This offered these women the opportunity to exert agency and independence by either providing a voice for the oppressed women or exerting agency by availing of informal translators. Indeed, these women drew specifically on aspects of their cultural identity (Bosworth, 1996), in this instance their language, to adapt and gain some independence from the penal regime. Of course, the use of informal translators could be interpreted as an act of resistance by FFNPs which demonstrates that power relations are not absolute, and that alternative arrangements can be made. However, in the absence of clarity on their motivations, we have resisted the temptation to describe the use of informal translators as a tactic (Mahey et al., 2019; Rowe, 2016) and/or friction (Rubin, 2015). These women did not present themselves as 'winners' (Tomaszewska, 2016), but rather offered this as an example of how they were able to adapt to the situation in which they found themselves. Put otherwise, penal power could not 'control the capacity of the subordinated peoples to speak' (Tomaszewska, 2016: 30).

Religious expression and practice

Rule 54 of the Bangkok Rules (2010) stipulates that 'prison authorities shall recognize that women prisoners from different religious and cultural backgrounds have distinctive needs' and a number of the participants in this study specifically referred to the critical role that the prison chaplain played in facilitating FFNPs' religious needs in the Dóchas Centre.[7] One participant revealed that 'in Elm House, every Wednesday, we sit together and read the bible [with the Chaplain]' (T8), while another participant highlighted how the chaplain offers support and a listening ear when FFNPs are struggling (T6). It has been documented that 'chaplains perform a diverse range of activities in the modern prison' (Sundt and Cullen, 1998), and chaplains in Irish prisons also play a crucial role in responding to the needs of Muslim prisoners (Doyle et al., 2022). One FFNP, for example, pointed out that the chaplain facilitated access to an Imam for Muslim prisoners (T5), which allowed this participant to assert her cultural identity in what was perceived by certain interviewees as a hegemonic Catholic Irish prison. The importance of the chaplaincy service has also been well documented in the international literature (Shaw, 1995; Sundt et al., 2002; Van Denend, 2007), and the positive sentiments that emerged from the interviews are particularly promising in light of previous media reports which claimed that the chaplain in the Dóchas Centre was taking sick leave due to the 'toxic environment of fear, indifference, hostility and ineptitude'

within the prison (O'Brien, 2020: 1). Notably, the Dóchas Centre Visiting Committee has emphasised the crucial support that the chaplaincy service offers to women – both Irish and foreign national – in terms of coping with the challenges of prison life (Dóchas Centre Visiting Committee, 2019).

Yet while there have been positive developments with respect to facilitating the religious expression of FFNPs in the Dóchas Centre, this is not to suggest that current practice could not be enhanced in certain respects. Rule 34(4) of the Irish Prison Rules, for instance, permits prisoners to attend meetings or services of their denomination, but two participants reported difficulties accessing prayer groups since the abovementioned prayer group was limited to one house within the prison (T19, T82). Moreover, a recent Irish report revealed that 'tensions between Muslim prisoners and prisoners of other religious persuasions, or of none at all, manifest in the prison environment and are exacerbated during periods of religious observance' (Doyle et al., 2022: 40), and similar encounters were recounted by a small number of the women in this study. One Muslim FFNP reported that she refrains from wearing a hijab due to bullying:

> …you know why I dress up like this? It's not my clothes … I have to put my hijab like this. But you know why put like this? I cry every day in the night about my religion. Because just for bullying. Like I going to be a target for bullying. (T9)

Equivalent sentiments were expressed by another Muslim FFNP, who observed 'I can't put scarf … with scarf you can get more bully … Even officers, they're going to look at you different. It's better not have the scarf' (T4). This brand of 'soft power' is particularly concerning when one considers the seminal role that religious expression can play as a support mechanism and/or adaptive strategy (Odrowaz-Coates, 2018: 15; Ruiz-García and Castillo-Algarra, 2014) in easing the adjustment period and lessening some of the deprivations inherent in imprisonment (Dammer, 2002; Kerley and Copes, 2009). On one level, this assertion of religious and cultural identity demonstrates that these FFNPs challenged and negotiated the power of the prison, as well as the cultures of conformity and bullying, by enacting their agency to wear the hijab. However, as subsequent bullying led to one FFNP wearing the hijab differently and another removing the hijab entirely, these women pursued ways to make sense of, and cope with the confinement, while simultaneously negotiating the power dynamics, which necessitated (apparent) compliance at times (Esposito et al., 2020).

Rule 23(2) of the Irish Prison Rules also explicitly states that 'provision shall be made to enable a prisoner to observe dietary practices of a religion or culture of which he or she professes to be a follower', but one Muslim FFNP stated that the IPS 'need to take [Muslim prisoners] serious in terms of the food they have to have … I think they should like really improve on that' (T5). The difficulties encountered in accommodating prisoners' religious dietary preferences are not a distinctly Irish phenomenon (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2006; Richards et al., 1995) and interviewees in a UK study recalled that their food was cross-contaminated when incorrectly labelled as Halal, reducing their options and occasionally leaving these prisoners to go hungry (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2016). One FFNP in this study was also faced with a similar

dilemma and was left with the unenviable choice of either eating *haram* food or adhering to her religious beliefs. She recalled:

> …like Ramadan … they're saying it's Halal, it's not Halal … they think not Halal just pork. But it's not like this … I say to my family 'what can I do?' My father say 'no, don't eat it's not halal' and I say to him 'but I can't stay without meat because they don't bring for me Halal'. (T9)

Another participant also observed that she had little option but to buy additional food in the tuck shop to satisfy her appetite due to issues with Halal food being served in the prison canteen, particularly during Ramadan (T5). Echoing findings by Bosworth (1996), these examples of FFNPs demanding halal, and refusing to eat the food prepared, demonstrate how these women draw on their cultural and religious identities to challenge, resist and assert independence from the degrading and homogenising penal regime. Such resistance reveals that religious food in prisons is not only associated with health and well-being but also a method of 'self-care' (Philippon, 2023: 131) and symbolically linked to the construction and preservation of identity (Earle and Phillips, 2012; Godderis, 2006; Richards et al., 1995).

Family relationships

The maintenance of family ties is vital to the psychological and emotional well-being of FNPs in custody (Barnoux and Wood, 2013; see also Sykes, 1958). FFNPs experience particular difficulty maintaining relationships with families abroad (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2006; Kruttschnitt and Hussemann, 2008; Matos, 2016; Quinn et al., 2019), and the loss of contact with family and friends has been found to affect women prisoners more than their male counterparts (Crewe et al., 2017; Foster, 2012; HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2006). In fact, FFNPs in a prior study expressed that separation from family becomes the primary punishment (Kruttschnitt and Hussemann, 2008). Notably, a participant in the Dóchas Centre explicitly stated that 'I'm so far from my family. That's the most difficult thing for me' (T5). While a number of the participants in this study had family members living in Ireland,[8] the majority of women indicated that their family were based abroad.[9] One interviewee among the latter cohort observed that 'it's very difficult' (T8), while another participant believed that maintaining family contact was more difficult for those with family abroad 'because the Irish have a family here and we … does not have family here so it's impossible' (T6).

Significantly, the majority of the participants were mothers,[10] and almost half of these women had children who were based in their country of origin rather than in Ireland.[11] Several of these women indicated that they did not have a partner or were not married.[12] While it cannot be stated with absolute certainty that all of these mothers were the primary caregiver, it has been documented elsewhere in the literature that women in prison are more likely to be the main carer of their children (Corston, 2007; Gerstein and Johnson, 2000; PRT and Hibiscus Initiatives, 2018). One parent in this study, for instance, asserted that 'my ex is not properly a father. And my son alone now' (T7), while another mother stated that 'she was kind of full parent. She was the mother and father of the family' (T1). Separation from loved ones has been found to

make the experience of imprisonment significantly different for women (Baldwin, 2018; Corston, 2007) with disrupted maternal relationships and the inability to care for children, particular sources of distress (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2006; Kruttschnitt and Hussemann, 2008; Matos, 2016). These worries are exacerbated for FFNPs who have children residing in a different country.

Conversely, parental imprisonment can have a profound impact on every aspect of a child's life, generating feelings of anger, shame, fright and isolation, resulting in poor outcomes in terms of educational attainment, well-being and anti-social behaviour (Dallaire and Wilson, 2010; Minson, 2019; PRT and Hibiscus Initiatives, 2018). The harmful impact that imprisonment can have on both mothers and their children was illustrated clearly by one FFNP:

> …He [son] big but all the time with me. He just turn eighteen when this happen. Now all the time alone, alone … he start to do drugs in Dublin and then he no answer the phone and I can do nothing. It's very hard because I know, my sister told me things and I can't help. After 8 months, my friend come back from Brazil and say he homeless. She get him back … and bring home with her. And now he is good work in shop and stop drugs. (T7)

Accordingly, FFNPs sometimes wear a mask in order to protect themselves or others from the strains of imprisonment and to preserve a particular identity (Bosworth, 1996), while others hide their custodial sentence from their families due to the shame of letting their loved ones down (Baldwin, 2018; Matos, 2016; PRT and Hibiscus Initiatives, 2012; Tomaszewska, 2016). The distance between FFNPs and their families, particularly when they reside in a different country, enables these cover stories to be easily maintained (Matos, 2016; Quinn et al., 2019). In this study, one woman asserted that 'her family, they don't know she is in prison and the video call, she only do with a friend because she know. But with her son only phone. They think she study in another country' (T11). Similarly, another FFNP adapted by hiding her imprisonment specifically from her children: 'my daughters don't know where I am because we're not expected to come to prison. They asking and I tell them '"ah I'm back soon"'(T7). Hairston (1991: 95) has written that the 'stripp[ing] of the mother role' was one of the 'most traumatic factors' in women's adjustment to imprisonment, with imprisoned mothers found to struggle with the pain that this separation causes to their children more than the pain that is inflicted upon themselves (Baldwin, 2018). Moreover, when combined with a feeling of failure regarding their maternal role, this can be a particularly harmful emotional and psychological process (Matos, 2016). This was poignantly captured by one FFNP who observed that 'when she went to prison … everything is gone … her daughter and her son they depend on her support' (T1). Motherhood, however, provides a source of identity more powerful than that of a prisoner (Bosworth, 1999), and these cover stories allowed these women to mask the 'emotional legacy of guilt and shame' (Baldwin, 2018: 53). Put otherwise, FFNPs utilised their identities as mothers and the maintenance of their familial ties to negotiate and resist the power of the prison (Bosworth, 1996) as well as any endeavours to eliminate their gendered identity as a mother (Bosworth, 1999).

Inmate–peer relationships

Many of the women interviewed highlighted that they were happy to mix with fellow prisoners from other nationalities.[13] One woman asserted how she 'mix with different country' (T3), while another revealed that she 'mix with the Irish, the Nigerians, Polish' (T8). Similar sentiments were expressed by FFNPs in a Portuguese study who viewed all nationalities equally (Matos, 2016: 361–362). Yet despite these sentiments, other participants indicated that they 'mix with foreigners. Just foreigner' (T12) and 'no Irish' (T3).[14] Such segregation may be partly attributable to shared language and cultural understandings rather than rigid lines of racial and ethnic division (Phillips, 2008). Indeed, this can be interpreted as an act of resistance by FFNPs to maintain their cultural identities against the hegemony of the prison akin to the Polish male prisoners in Martynowicz's (2018) study in Northern Ireland. However, certain FFNPs indicated that 'discernible cliques or groups' (Tetrault et al., 2020: 541) emerged based solely on their commonality as FNPs. One participant, for instance, 'realised a lot of foreigners, not even just race, just being a foreigner, we all like stick together' (T5), while another participant pointed out:

> Yeah, we mix each other. We live same house, same landings and … I have foreigner friends … Yeah, foreigners. Not Irish, I don't have Irish … Yeah, they are Congo, there was Pakistan, they were Brazil … Lithuania, Polish, yeah. (T4)

This concept of 'sticking together' was also evident in a US study where FFNPs stayed 'pretty much to themselves' (Kruttschnitt and Hussemann, 2008: 719). Conversely, it is not uncommon that 'coming from a particular national or ethnic background can constitute grounds for discrimination' (Berket, 2015: 366) and a number of participants observed that the Irish 'don't want to stay with us. They bullying us' (T3) and that 'it's very difficult to go with Irish' (T12). Other FFNPs also reported feeling excluded,[15] while one interviewee stated that she felt 'a little bit [isolated] in the house from the Irish girls. I think they don't like [me]' (T11). The distinction between resistance and adaptation to cope with exclusion is not always clear for these women. While it is reasonable to surmise that exercising agency for self-preservation in the face of prejudice aligns with myriad definitions of resistance, it is also likely that these participants were merely coping with the prejudice and power imbalance of being individually and collectively 'othered'.

Language barriers permeate various aspects of the prison experience for FNPs (Bhui, 2009; Iversen et al., 2013) and it became apparent throughout the study that language proficiency impeded the ability of some non-English-speaking participants to form relationships with Irish female prisoners and other FFNPs. A staff member in a UK prison opined that FNPs may assume that a cultural or language gap exists (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2006: 17) and this viewpoint was shared by one FFNP who stated that 'some girls in the house don't want to speak with us because we speak Portuguese' (T11). Other participants felt that the lack of mixing was primarily attributable to language barriers or cultural differences rather than racism or discrimination. One interviewee observed that 'if she

speak [English], she could have more friends … it's not about her, it's about language' (T10), while another woman emphasised the differences in culture:

> …one thing is that sometimes because I'm not Irish … I just feel like maybe I don't understand what it's like you know? A lot of things that people do here in Ireland and sometimes I do feel that ostracise me. We don't do the things like they do here in Ireland. (T5)

Similar sentiments were expressed by foreign national women in an English study where shared cultural knowledge was manifested through familiar humour (Tomaszewska, 2016: 32). A number of FFNPs in this study believed that much of the differential treatment from other prisoners stemmed from a lack of knowledge of their culture. This was captured succinctly by one FFNP who stated, 'Educate them and tell them people are different. They are not going to be only Irish people who is here. Some people don't know how to speak English … They have a different religion, they have difficult culture' (T4).

While the majority of women highlighted that they feel safe in the Dóchas Centre,[16] and one woman explicitly stated that she hadn't 'experienced any [racism] personally' (T5), other participants reported that they had been subjected to incidents of racism, discrimination and bullying.[17] Indeed, several studies on female imprisonment have highlighted that bullying, indirect and direct, is highly prevalent in female prisons (Nelson et al., 2010; Quinlan, 2011; Quinn et al., 2019) and often exacerbated due to language difficulties and discrimination (Nelson et al., 2010). Previous research in the UK has highlighted instances of racism and discrimination between national prisoners and FNPs (Cox and Sacks-Jones, 2016: 13; HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2006; Tomaszewska, 2016) with FFNPs in other jurisdictions observing resentful treatment (Easteal, 1993: 180) and discriminatory name calling when tensions are high (Matos, 2016: 361). Similarly, there were instances in this study where FFNPs were subject to discriminatory and racially abusive comments such as 'go home, go home, this is not your place. Get out of the country' (T2) and being called 'black bastard' (T3). Racism experienced by prisoners negatively impacts on mental and physical health, self-identity and self-esteem (Wallace et al., 2016; Williams and Etkins, 2021; Williams et al., 2019) and produces 'feelings of confusion, self-doubt, and alienation, further unsettling prisoners in their quest to survive and cope in prison' (Phillips, 2012: 185). In this regard, a small number of FFNPs referred to instances of bullying that they were subjected to due to their race or culture (T4, T9). One FFNP, for example, noted that 'you could stay in your room for one week. You don't want to go out because too much bullying' (T3) while another woman highlighted that 'all the time you have to [be] scared some[one] might attack you … You have to look behind your back' (T4). The frustration that persistent racist abuse can generate is also reflected in the experiences of FFNPs in UK prisons and 'sticking together' with those of a similar culture, or those who also stand out from the hegemony of the prison regime, appears to have been a deliberate attempt to negotiate the power dynamics in the prison. Women oftentimes have to negotiate power, not necessarily with prison staff, but with each other (Bosworth, 1996) and foreign nationals 'sticking together' – creating a form of solidarity and power while maintaining their cultural identities – can be interpreted as relationship management to cope with bullying, racism and mistreatment by the women deriving from the detaining jurisdiction.

While the adoption of such strategies to cope with interpersonal conflict or prejudice was certainly a strong assertion of agency (Tomaszewska, 2016), the participants did not explicitly frame such acts of solidarity as resistance, and thus, we must only recognise these 'adaptative qualities' and avoid the 'hazardous endeavour' of 'putting meaning onto an action' (Carrabine, 2004: 56).

Staff–FFNP relationships

Previous research has revealed negative relationships between FNPs and prison staff as well as an overwhelming lack of respect (Bhui, 2004; HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2006; Iversen et al., 2013), but the range of staff–prisoner relationships reported by the participants in this study varied from officer to officer. On the one hand, a number of FFNPs reported that prison staff carried out their duties, to use the words of the Irish Prison Rules, 2007, in a manner that respects the 'dignity and human rights' of the prisoners.[18] One interviewee, for instance, reported that they 'never have a problem with the officers' (T8), while another stated that 'they don't mistreat us in any way … They treat me the same as everybody else to be honest' (T5). On the other hand, other prisoners reported mixed[19] or negative[20] relationships with prison staff, with one interviewee opining that the treatment of FFNPs varied from prisoner to prisoner: 'when they like you, they treat you good. When they hate you, they make you suffer in prison' (T9). Illustrating how language results in further oppression, and a greater exertion of power over FFNPs, other testimonies also specifically discussed how the inability to speak the language of the detaining country undermined the capacity of certain participants to communicate and make themselves understood to prison staff. Consequently, language barriers or 'linguistic exclusion' (Martynowicz, 2018: 273) exacerbated staff–FFNP relations with some non-English-speaking participants reporting that officers are dismissive of their needs. One participant observed 'because they can't speak the language … the officers don't care about it' (T8), while another interviewee stated that 'some officers, because she no speak English, don't care and don't want to listen' (T11). Similar experiences were documented by other FFNPs who opined that prison staff 'don't listen to her or foreign guys because they don't have the patience to understand what you are saying' (T1) and that 'when you go talk you go talk to the officer … officer she shouting she don't want to listen' (T12). This mirrored findings in England and Wales, where a FNP observed that prison staff fail to understand that FNPs with poor English may be unable to understand what they say, often resulting in FNPs being shouted at or ignored (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2006).

Relatedly, a number of the participants in our study, akin to research in other jurisdictions (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2006; Iversen et al., 2013: 70; Warr, 2016), reported receiving differential treatment from prison staff compared to Irish prisoners.[21] Core penological issues – including justice, authority and trust – are particularly important for female prisoners (Liebling, 2011), but one woman observed that officers 'treat foreigner different … foreigner they treat them very badly' (T12). Similarly, another participant noted that 'If you are from here, they treat one way but if you're not, they treat totally different' (T2). Discretion is a core feature of prison work (Crewe, 2011) spanning the gamut of positive and negative practices and is inextricably linked to officers' professionalism and the legitimacy of the prison regime (Carrabine, 2005; Liebling, 2011). Crewe et al.

(2017) noted that female prisoners are deeply reliant on officers to alleviate their distress, but discretion appears, at times, to be exercised in a subtle but deliberate way to deny or delay basic requests from FNPs (Doyle et al., 2022; T3) and reportedly extends to preferential decision-making with respect to the allocation of cells (T1, T7) and work opportunities (T3). When one prisoner was questioned on whether she believed such differential treatment was attributable to race and skin colour, she responded 'I think so maybe I'm this colour … I'm treated different because I'm no Irish' (T3). The frustration that such differential treatment provoked was also captured by another FFNP who stated 'why they not treat all the same? Because we are prisoners why they treat different like this? All of us at the same you have to treat all of us the same' (T12). These experiences are reminiscent of findings that emanated from studies conducted in other jurisdictions (Cox and Sacks-Jones, 2016; HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2006; Iversen et al., 2013; Turnbull and Hasselberg, 2017) and mirror previous findings of inconsistent use of staff authority and discretion in women's prisons (Carlen, 1983; Cox and Sacks-Jones, 2016; Crewe et al., 2022; Tomaszewska, 2016).

At the extreme end of the spectrum, a number of women reported that they have been subject to racism, discrimination and bullying from prison staff.[22] One woman asserted that '[staff] treat foreigner very badly' (T12), while another stated that 'Some of the officer they are not nice … bullying too much' (T3). Moreover, other women reported that 'it's very difficult in prison' (T12) and 'you might be bullied, might be the officer. Some officers … It's very difficult for me to stay in prison in Ireland, very difficult' (T4). These perspectives resonate with previous research conducted with FNPs in the UK (Bhui, 2004; Cox and Sacks-Jones, 2016; HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2006), where FNPs referred to termed a 'racedar', or 'an intuitive sense or belief about an individual's racism even if it was not articulated through the use of racist language' (Phillips, 2012: 177). Such differential treatment, and the instances of racism and bullying by staff, further demonstrate the greater degradation and disempowerment (Carlen, 1983) experienced by FFNPs due to their racial and ethnic identities. While traces of the literature on resistance emerged implicitly throughout the participant interviews, including potential friction and/or tactics, these actions were not specifically formulated or framed by the participants as such (Chamberlen, 2016; Mahey et al., 2019; Rowe, 2016; Rubin, 2015; Vasiliou, 2020). However, attempts to negotiate and adapt to the boundaries of what is permissible and legitimate within the prison regime (Bosworth, 1996) were much more overt. One woman, for instance, observed that 'you no have to treat me with your hate … you are here to look after me. Doesn't matter my charge … I am here in prison. I am in your country in prison' (T9). Similarly, another woman stated that 'the behaviour of some officers need to change … some officers don't like prisoners so why come work here?' (T7). This finding is particularly alarming given that women who offend are overwhelmingly characterised by histories of abuse and trauma which makes them more acutely sensitive to certain forms of staff conduct (Crewe et al., 2022).

Conclusion

Drawing on 13 semi-structured interviews, the findings of this study reveal the critical problems that define the daily lived experience of FFNPs in Irish prisons. In addition to being imprisoned within an unfamiliar environment and experiencing the gendered pains of familial and maternal separation, FFNPs are subject to severe isolation and

negative treatment due to language barriers, religion, culture and discrimination. Yet while Irish prisons were experienced as fundamentally disempowering for a large cohort of the participants in this study, the testimonies also shed light on the multi-faceted ways in which FFNPs exercised their agency and attempted to adapt to carceral power in order to preserve their gendered, racial, ethnic and cultural identities.

A wider consensus has emerged that the response to women in prison urgently requires a gender-informed approach which considers women's complex needs (Bangkok Rules, 2010; Corston, 2007; Irish Penal Reform Trust, 2021) – recognised recently in the Irish prison system with the opening of a new state-of-the-art 'trauma-informed' female prison in Limerick (Dunphy, 2023) – but this should not override the fact that the research that forms the basis of this article was conducted at a time when there has been an impasse between the Minister for Justice and the Inspector of Prisons with respect to the publication of two reports that allegedly document the extent of bullying and intimidation inside the Dóchas Centre. The Inspector of Prisons has since resigned citing the constant attempts to thwart her work, but the findings of this study demonstrate that FFNPs are not impervious to what the former Prison Chaplain described as a culture of 'fear, indifference, hostility and ineptitude' (O'Brien, 2020: 1). As well as demonstrating the extent to which FFNPs negotiated the power relations in the prison and reiterating the urgent need to address this 'toxic environment' (ibid), the findings that emerged from this study reaffirm the oft-stated view that the use of imprisonment for women who offend, including foreign national women, should remain a last resort (Bangkok Rules, 2010; Corston, 2007; Doyle et al., 2022), especially for mothers, who due to less contact with their children, are at a higher risk of poor mental and physical health (Foster, 2012). The English translation of the Irish word 'dóchas' means 'hope', and we argue that the IPS need to look no further than the Bangkok Rules (2010) to provide these women with some of what has been a rare commodity in the prison in recent times.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Rosemary Mangan and Stephanie Thompson for their research assistance. We are also especially thankful to all the interviewees who participated in this study.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Irish Research Council New Foundations Scheme 2020.

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Notes

1. T1, T3, T6, T7, T8, T10, T11, T12, T13.
2. T3, T4, T6, T7, T8, T12.
3. T6, T7, T8, T11.
4. T2, T3, T6, T7, T8, T9, T10, T11, T12, T13.
5. United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (The Nelson Mandela Rules).
6. T5, T10, T11, T12, T13.
7. T6, T7, T8, T10.
8. T3, T4, T7, T9.
9. T1, T2, T3, T6, T8, T9, T10, T11, T12, T13.
10. T1, T2, T3, T4, T7, T8, T9, T10, T11, T12, T13.
11. T1, T2, T7, T10, T11, T12, T13.
12. T1, T2, T3, T10, T11, T12, T13.
13. T3, T4, T76, T7, T8, T12.
14. T3, T4, T7, T10, T11, T12.
15. T7, T11.
16. T3, T5, T6, T7, T8, T10, T11, T12, T13.
17. T1, T2, T3, T4, T7, T9, T11, T12.
18. T5, T8, T10, T11, T13.
19. T2, T3, T4, T7, T9, T11.
20. T1, T2, T3, T6, T12.
21. T1, T2, T3, T6, T7, T9, T11.
22. T1, T2, T3, T6, T9, T12.

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