



The crisis of affectivity in Italian prisons

While incarceration is meant to be a deprivation of freedom, it should not amount to the deprivation of dignity. In Italy, however, the systematic denial of affective and sexual rights to inmates reveals a contradiction at the heart of the country's penal system: a rift between constitutional principles and the lived experience of imprisonment.

Italian law, as codified in D.P.R. 230/2000, Article 77, explicitly prohibits sexual acts within prisons. Conjugal visits, where permitted, are conducted under continuous surveillance by staff, effectively discouraging any form of intimacy (Decembrotto, 2013). Consequently, apart from the occasional "stolen kiss," romantic and sexual expression is virtually non-existent for inmates in Italy.

This restrictive stance is in stark contrast with constitutional guarantees. Article 2 of the Italian Constitution recognizes the inviolable rights of the individual, while Articles 29, 30, and 31 affirm the importance of the family unit. Furthermore, Article 27 clearly states that punishments must aim at the re-education of the convicted and should not be contrary to human dignity. As former Bollate prison director Lucia Castellano observes, the reality behind bars often nullifies these legal ideals: "Rehabilitation, or social reintegration, remains on paper. Respect for dignity, as well" (Castellano & Stasio, 2010, p. 14).

To mitigate this gap, Italian legislation offers *permessi premio* - special leave permits allowing some inmates to spend limited time (up to 45 days per year) with their families. However, these are granted only to prisoners deemed well-behaved and not socially dangerous (Citraro, 2018). Intimate contact within prison remains virtually prohibited, except in rare experimental cases like the "affection rooms" at Milan's Opera Detention Center. These "love rooms" are equipped with household items and allow selected families a full day of private interaction (Citraro, 2018).

Despite limited implementation, such initiatives show promise. International research has linked access to affective and sexual expression with reduced tension, fewer violent incidents, and lower recidivism (Giordano, 2022). Still, these remain exceptions, not the rule.

The cost of denying affectivity is not merely ethical but also medical. Inmates in Italy suffer disproportionately from psychiatric disorders - many stemming from the disruptive environment of prison life and the deprivation of natural rhythms, including intimacy (Poneti, 2018; Clemmer, 2004).

The emotional isolation experienced behind bars is often a major factor in depression, anxiety, and even suicide. The year 2022 marked a grim record in Italian prisons, with one suicide every

five days - many cases linked to loneliness and emotional disconnection (DAP, 2010).

This repression also increases health risks. Due to the prohibition of condoms in prison, inmates may engage in unsafe practices. In a Bologna prison, healthcare staff reported inmates requesting latex gloves for unofficial use, raising serious concerns about disease transmission (Decembrotto, 2013).

Furthermore, the denial of emotional and sexual expression amounts to more than discomfort - it can constitute institutional violence. The European Committee for the Prevention of Torture has criticized the surveillance of intimate visits and emphasized the need to respect inmates' privacy and emotional needs (Re & Ciuffoletti, 2020). As the World Health Organization asserts, sexual health is integral to overall well-being, and its denial violates fundamental human rights (WHO, 2002).

Inmates themselves describe forced abstinence as "mental torture," a form of suffering that not only disconnects them from their partners but also erodes their sense of identity (Re & Ciuffoletti, 2020). Autoeroticism, while common, often becomes compulsive, obsessive, or emotionally hollow (Sofri & Ceraudo, as cited in Re & Ciuffoletti, 2020; Morelli, 2004).

To conclude, the Italian prison system, as it currently operates, systematically ignores the emotional lives of its inmates. While reforms like affection rooms are steps in the right direction, they remain isolated and underfunded. A truly rehabilitative penal system must go beyond control and punishment; it must protect the emotional, sexual, and psychological integrity of individuals. If Italy is to uphold its constitutional values, it must recognize that the right to affection does not end at the prison gate.

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