



## The crisis of sexual and emotional health for incarcerated women in Italy

In Italian prisons, female inmates face not only the loss of liberty but the denial of affectivity and sexuality, essential components of human dignity and health. While prisons are theoretically meant to rehabilitate, current policies often dehumanize - especially for women - by systematically ignoring emotional and sexual needs.

Despite Articles 2, 29, 30, and 31 of the Italian Constitution guaranteeing the right to dignity and family ties, actual practice reflects repression rather than protection. Article 27 states that punishment must aim at rehabilitation and may not violate human dignity. Yet, conjugal and affective rights are treated as privileges granted through *permessi premio* - temporary leave permits, restricted to „deserving“ inmates with a clean behavioral record (Citraro, 2018).

Inside prisons, any form of intimate contact is effectively forbidden. D.P.R. 230/2000 (Art. 77) prohibits sexual activity altogether. Initiatives like the “affection rooms” at Milan Opera and Bollate prisons are rare and highly controlled experiments, offered to only a handful of families each year (Maturo, 2018).

### The psychological impact of deprivation

The emotional toll of this deprivation is vast. According to Poneti (2018), the prison environment is deeply pathogenic, transforming pre-existing vulnerabilities into full psychological disorders. Women often arrive in prison with histories of trauma, abuse, and marginalization. The loss of affectivity intensifies these wounds, leading to depression, anxiety, and emotional detachment.

Clemmer (2004) and DAP (2010) link the lack of emotional connection with increased risk of self-harm and suicide. In 2022, Italian prisons recorded one suicide every five days - a tragic figure often associated with relational isolation.

### Apathy, obsession, and the denial of identity

The prison setting also damages sexual identity. Re & Ciuffoletti (2020) emphasize that inmates experience both obsessive sexual behaviors and emotional apathy. Autoeroticism becomes a compulsive substitute, often marked by shame rather than relief. Many inmates define their emotional suffering as a form of „mental torture.“

As Morelli (2004) observed, incarcerated women frequently report feeling emotionally numb, stripped of the capacity to feel or relate intimately - furthering the process of institutional dehumanization.

## Public health risks: silence is dangerous

Beyond psychological damage, denial of sexuality poses clear public health risks. Condoms and sexual health services are generally unavailable. As reported by a prison nurse in Decembrotto's 2013 study, inmates request latex gloves for use as improvised protection - a troubling sign of unacknowledged sexual activity and unsafe practices. This institutional silence fosters shame, secrecy, and risk, in contrast to WHO standards, which define sexual health as a fundamental human right involving physical, emotional, and social well-being (WHO, 2002). So, Italy must move from repression to recognition. The introduction of love rooms - spaces equipped for family privacy is a start, but current efforts remain experimental and limited. Research by Giordano (2022) shows that access to intimacy significantly reduces prison violence, disciplinary incidents, and recidivism.

As Re & Ciuffoletti (2020) note, denying sexuality is a form of institutional violence. Legal reform, as proposed by the States General on Penal Execution, must include structured affectivity policies, regular medical access, and training for staff in gender-sensitive care. Sexual and emotional health are central to rehabilitation. The Italian prison system must acknowledge that the right to affection is not erased by incarceration.

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