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Mixed-Gender Practices in Belgian Prison Regimes: The Politics of Gender Segregation in Prison

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ABSTRACT

This empirical study examines mixed-gender practices in Belgian prisons, where men and women interact mainly in supervised work, education, and cultural activities. These limited practices, as exceptions to gender segregation policies, reveal how prison regimes are shaped by a profound preoccupation with managing heterosexual relationships between incarcerated people and thereby reproduce binary and heteronormative notions of gender and relationships. Drawing on interviews with incarcerated people, the study reveals that gender-based harms and violence persist in both mixed and single-gender spaces. The findings highlight the need to critically consider gender segregation policies and recognize the gendered assumptions underpinning them.

KEYWORDS

Prison; mixed-gender; gender; gender-based violence; gender segregation; heteronormativity; incarceration

INTRODUCTION

Since the establishment of modern prison systems, men and women have traditionally been incarcerated in separate facilities, justified by the rationale of protecting incarcerated women from (sexual) violence (Resnik, 1982). This practice of gender-based segregation is supported by international protocols, such as the United Nations Nelson Mandela Rules and the European Prison Rules, which aim primarily to protect incarcerated women from potential sexual abuse by incarcerated men. Rule 18.9 of the European Prison Rules, however, permits the joint participation of men and women in specific activities when in the participants' best interest. Despite this provision, gender segregation remains the prevailing norm in prisons worldwide, with mixed-gender practices being an exception (Mathiassen, 2017).

Research on gender segregation in prisons has historically focused on how it restricts heterosexual relationships (Sykes, 1958/2007) and reinforces hegemonic gender norms (Acker, 1990; Comfort, 2018; Lipman-Blumen, 1976; Rostaing, 2017). Previous studies have extensively discussed the hypermasculine ideal present among incarcerated men, emphasizing the performative enforcement of prevailing masculine norms through violent rejection of those who do not conform to them (Connell, 2014; De Viggiani, 2012; Kupers, 2017; Ricciardelli et al., 2015; Sumner & Sexton, 2016).

Incarcerated women, then, do not only constitute a numerical minority in penal institutions, averaging at 6.8% of the global prison population (Fair & Walmsley, 2025), but also in terms of structures of gendered domination expressed in the architectural lay-out, prison regime, activities offered and interpersonal relationships (both with staff and incarcerated people (Nederlandt & Vanliefde, 2023). Gendered regimes which have been documented to reinforce gender norms by

often imposing passivity and neglecting the physical needs of incarcerated women, relegating them to domestic tasks and pathologizing or overly sanctioning assertive behavior on their behalf (Ballesteros-Peña, 2018; Carlen, 1983; Carlen & Worrall, 2004; Chetcuti-Osorovitz, 2021; Crewe et al., 2017, 2023; Da Cunha, 2020; Hannah-Moffat, 2001; Moore & Scraton, 2016). Beyond the gendered nature of these regimes, incarcerated women often have lesser access to services, due to their minority status (Resnik, 1982).

Working with incarcerated women is frequently perceived by prison staff as more demanding, which is sometimes symptomatic of the multiple layers of vulnerability that characterize the profiles of incarcerated women (Britton, 2003; Carlen, 1983; Crewe et al., 2023; Nuytiens & Christiaens, 2015). The compounded disadvantages and vulnerabilities regarding financial precariousness, mental health problems, substance dependencies, and/or physical or sexual victimization experienced by incarcerated women are well documented (Bartels et al., 2020; Carlen, 1983; Crewe et al., 2023; McCausland & Baldry, 2017; Nuytiens & Christiaens, 2015). Tubex and Gately (2025) suggest that the institutional response of gender segregation and gendered regimes can be understood as part of cycles of harm: a recurring pattern in which early trauma, violence, poverty, mental health issues, and substance abuse contribute to women's criminalization and imprisonment, while incarceration itself reinforces these vulnerabilities and perpetuates the cycle. Consequently, these institutional responses may further accentuate the existing challenges incarcerated women face.

Critically, the existing body of knowledge has largely focused on the experiences of cisgender men and women, often overlooking the growing presence of gender diversity within penal institutions. The presence of gender-diverse people necessitates a more nuanced understanding of how gender operates within these systems, forcing gender integration onto a simplistic male/female dichotomy (Sumner & Jenness, 2014). As Greene (2023) and Sumner and Sexton (2016) observe, the lack of recognition of gender diversity in prison research has obscured a crucial aspect of how gender boundaries are constructed, policed, and navigated within carceral environments. A central tenet of Jenness, Sumner and Sexton's (2016, p. 604) seminal work on sexual victimization of incarcerated transgender women in men's prisons is that these experiences must be understood as a *"form of gendered violence: violence against women in the context of sex-segregated prisons that assume and organize around a gender binary."*

Building on Walker's (2016) exploration of racial segregation in penal institutions, this study extends existing research on gender segregation as an organizing principle of imprisonment by studying incarcerated people's and prison staff experiences with and perceptions of mixed-gendered practices in prison. Our study suggests that interactions between incarcerated men and women are predominantly conceptualized through the lens of (the risk of) sexual relationships between cisgender and heterosexual people, thereby underscoring the pervasive binary understanding of gender and heteronormativity in staff and incarcerated people's perceptions. Our findings furthermore complement the literature on the dynamics of heterosexual relationships between incarcerated persons (e.g., Carcedo et al., 2011, 2012; Joël, 2017) with additional insights from mixed-gender practices.

The question of mixed-gender regimes consequently is at the heart of the tensions between the proposed rationale of protection of incarcerated women and the provision of gender-specific regimes in a male-dominated penal institutional landscape against principles of normalization and integration beyond gender or sex as a basis for segregation (Cardi et al., 2024; Renvoisé, 2021; Resnik, 1982). Normalization is a key principle in the Belgian Prison Act and in Rule 5.5 of the European Prison Rules, which asserts that life in prison should resemble the conditions in free society as closely as possible, hence limiting deprivations beyond the deprivation of liberty.

SITUATING INCARCERATED WOMEN IN THE BELGIAN PRISON LANDSCAPE

Belgium's prison population comprises approximately 13.730 incarcerated people for a capacity of 11.064 as of June 2026. Women (about 600) constitute a minority within this demographic,

thereby representing a mere 5% of the total incarcerated population. Belgium currently has 35 prisons, alongside a penitentiary psychiatric facility, two forensic psychiatric centers, five transition houses¹ and three detention houses.² Our research centers on all ten facilities wherein both men and women are incarcerated: one prison located in Brussels, three in Wallonia, and five in Flanders, along with one detention house.³ Within these ‘mixed’ establishments, women are accommodated in a designated women’s ward, featuring distinct courtyards. Belgium’s three biggest prisons (with a total population of around 800–1200 people per prison) each house 70 to 100 women. The other seven facilities have women’s wards of a smaller capacity, housing 20 to 50 women. Given their relatively small numbers and the isolation of their quarters, women typically face more limited or difficult access to certain facilities, such as open prisons, detention and transition houses, as well as to specific areas within prisons, such as psychiatric annexes and drug-free sections. Moreover, they encounter barriers to accessing certain infrastructures, particularly sports facilities, medical services, and a range of activities (Nederlandt & Gauthier, 2023; Nederlandt & Vanliefde, 2023). The main prison infrastructure, including sports amenities, training facilities, and workshops, as well as essential services like registries and medical or psycho-social services, predominantly caters to the male population housed in the men’s quarters.

Recent quantitative studies mapping the profiles of women in prisons and under custodial measures (including electronic monitoring) in Belgium indicate that incarcerated women in Belgium are predominantly in their thirties, mostly Belgian nationals (66,1% to 68, 7%), and often have one or more children (about 70 to 80%) (Doffiny, 2026; Favril, 2024). Their profiles are characterized by marked socioeconomic disadvantage, including low educational attainment, high unemployment before incarceration, financial precarity, and frequent housing instability or homelessness (Doffiny, 2026; Favril, 2024; Nuytiens & Christiaens, 2015). Confirming findings from Nuytiens and Christiaens (2015), the profile studies document extensive vulnerabilities in the form of disrupted family relationships, social isolation, exposure to violence and victimization, and strong links between offending and intimate partners. The Flemish survey further documents severe health and psychosocial needs, with high rates of childhood abuse (60% reporting at least one form of abuse, including 38% sexual abuse), psychiatric disorders, substance-use problems, psychological distress, and suicidality (Favril, 2024). Judicially, women are often serving relatively short custodial sentences and many have prior criminal records or previous detentions. In the Francophone study, 88.5% of women had been sentenced to three years or less, and nearly 70% had served between one month and one year of detention (Doffiny, 2026), while a substantial minority were serving longer sentences in Flemish prisons. Among sentenced women in Flanders, 80.7% were serving a sentence of more than three years and 22.3% had received a sentence of ten years or more, reflecting the fact that the Flemish study only included women physically detained in prison rather than those serving shorter sentences under electronic monitoring (Favril, 2024). Their offending profile is dominated by nonviolent mostly economically motivated offenses, especially property offenses (25% in Flanders and 51% in the Francophone study) such as theft and fraud, drug offenses (33% in Flanders; 13% in the Francophone sample), and traffic offenses, while violent offenses are less common though not negligible (averaging about 20%) (Doffiny, 2026; Favril, 2024). Co-offending, particularly with intimate partners, is more frequently documented in incarcerated women than men, with many offenses occurring within contexts of social, relational, and economic vulnerability (Doffiny, 2026; Nuytiens & Christiaens, 2015).

Concerning prison staff working in women’s prison sections, Belgian prison staff are mixed-gender in both men’s and women’s prisons since 2000. At least 60% of the surveillance staff must

¹Transition houses are small-scale facilities (with an average of 15 places) for convicted men at the end of their sentence meant to support them with re-entry.

²Detention houses are small-scale facilities (between 20 and 90 places) that only hold men and women serving sentences of up to three years who have not committed sex offences or terrorist crimes.

³There is no women-only prison in Belgium.

be of the same sex as the incarcerated people under their supervision. However, this threshold serves as a baseline, often surpassed, particularly within women's quarters where a higher proportion of same-gender staff is common. It is noteworthy that despite the presence of mixed-gender staff, incarcerated men do not necessarily perceive their detention environment as mixed-gender. For instance, some incarcerated men stated in our study that they '*never see any women here*', while their prison governor or social worker are often women, echoing orientations toward female staff based on professional identity instead of gender identity described by Crewe (2006) and Zimmer (1987).

MIXED-GENDER PRACTICES IN PRISONS: AN EMERGING BUT PRECARIOUS PHENOMENON

Gender segregation implies separate housing for incarcerated men and women either in separate facilities, either in separate wings of the same facility. Although penal institutions where both men and women are incarcerated are sometimes labeled as 'mixed', housing is completely segregated with measures implemented to prevent direct contact between incarcerated men and women. Some exceptions exist, allowing men and women to participate together to education, work, and leisure activities or occasional events. We define these 'mixed-gender practices' as all occasions where incarcerated men and women can meaningfully interact in prison settings, with organized activities and events being a large but not exclusive part of them.

Despite their exceptional character, mixed-gender practices within prisons have been gradually emerging beyond the confined scope of occasional events and training activities in recent years. In Europe, mixed-gender activities are documented within Belgian and French prisons where both men and women are incarcerated, while housing remains gender segregated (Cardi et al., 2024; Nederlandt & Vanliefde, 2024; Renvoisé, 2021). While France has a legal framework for mixed-gender activities, these practices operate without any legal framework in Belgium. The Belgian Prison Act (in article 15, §1, °2) stipulates that incarcerated women should be housed separately from incarcerated men, but does not foresee in any legal safeguards or standards regarding equal or equitable treatment for incarcerated women. Discrimination based on gender in prisons and in free society is in principle protected by anti-discrimination legislation and can become the object of a complaint the competent body of the Institute for the Equality for Men and Women. No complaints have been recorded regarding to the differential treatment of incarcerated women as of yet. Mixed-gender activities and housing within institutions catering to individuals with severe psychiatric disorders, detained for safety measures, do exist but fall beyond the purview of this study.⁴ As a notable case, certain modules within some Spanish prisons accommodate both incarcerated men and women in the same housing unit under specific conditions: the module excludes people convicted of sexual offenses, has participants adhere to a code of conduct and houses them in single-person cells (Carcedo et al., 2011, 2012).

This notable absence of legal frameworks and standards on mixed-gendered practices at national level results in these initiatives being highly unstable.

Denmark's transition from a mixed-gender incarceration model to complete gender segregation illustrates this volatility. Mixed-gender units were first introduced in 1976 at Ringe Prison, where men and women were housed in separate cells within shared sections (Scharff Smith & Ugelvik, 2017). Following the closure of Denmark's only women's correctional facility in the early 2000s, all incarcerated women were accommodated in small groups within mixed-gender prisons, though the degree of integration—such as in housing, work assignments, and recreational activities—varied across facilities (Mathiassen, 2017). During this period, both the European

⁴For example, the Belgian Forensic Psychiatric Centre in Antwerp has mixed-gender housing and therapeutic activities.

Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) and the Danish Ombudsman expressed concern over the involuntary placement of women in mixed-gender units, the absence of gender-specific sanitary facilities, and reported instances of women being coerced into sexual activity with incarcerated men in exchange for narcotics (Mathiassen, 2021). In response to these issues, Denmark adopted a policy of full gender segregation in 2020, relocating all incarcerated women to the women-only Jyderup Prison (Mathiassen, 2021).

The literature addressing mixed-gender practices in prisons is scarce yet certain studies detail country-specific policies and practices, such as in Denmark (Mathiassen, 2017) and France (Cardi et al., 2024; Renvoisé, 2021). Other data sources, which are linked to the monitoring of sexual violence, such as the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) in the United States, associate certain reported cases of sexual assault by either other incarcerated people or staff members with the mixed-gender population in the same facility (US Commission on Civil Rights, 2020). This evidences a key preoccupation in the discussion on sex segregation or mixed-gender practices: the management of the risk of heterosexual sexual violence.

While these studies have contributed to the growing body of literature on the pervasive role of gender as an organizing principle within prisons, there remains a critical need for further inquiry into the implications of gender segregation policies and mixed-gender practices for incarcerated people. By studying staff and incarcerated persons' experiences with and attitudes toward mixed-gender practices, this article contributes to understanding the 'politics of gender segregation' within the institution of the prison, and how it governs interpersonal relationships between incarcerated people and staff members.

METHODOLOGY

The empirical study comprised data collection through interviews (either individual or in group) with 97 participants in 9 out of the 10 Belgian prisons where women are incarcerated from December 2020 to October 2023.⁵ The sample included 2 members from the staff department of the federal Ministry of Justice; 7 individuals from the central prison administration; 9 prison governors; 9 representatives from external service providers involved in coordinating educational, cultural, and sports activities within prisons; 10 members of prison monitoring commissions; and 60 incarcerated persons, comprising both (30) men and (30) women.⁶ Additionally, the researchers carried out one-day observational sessions on interview days. It was vital to document incarcerated people's experiences and attitudes, but also of the different staff members who decide on and implement these practices in order to get a multi-faceted view of the implications of mixed-gender practices broadly.

Both staff members and incarcerated persons were selected through purposive sampling. Most staff members were interviewed individually, in addition to five group interviews with members of a same team or organization (prison monitoring commissions, transfer and R&D department of the prison administration, and activity coordinators).

Incarcerated persons were interviewed either individually or in the format of a focus group. When focus groups were possible in the facility, two separate focus groups (one with the incarcerated men and one with the incarcerated women) with 4 to 6 participants were conducted,

⁵This study was conducted with funding from the FRS-FNRS (35247345) and the FWO Vlaanderen (11K1621N). Ethical clearances were obtained from the UCLouvain SHS-5 Sciences Humaines et sociales – 5 (35247345) and the KU Leuven SMEC (G-2020-2635-R2(MAR)).

⁶This study utilises the 'male-female' binary in the way it was used in our participants' discourses. However, this does not reflect the authors understanding of gender as a complex social construct and acknowledgement of gender diversity. Our study welcomed gender-diverse individuals and included one trans woman.

both moderated by two researchers.⁷ Beyond facilitating the authorization from governors (for practical and safety reasons), organizing separate focus groups was a precaution to allow participants to address sensitive topics (such as experiences of sexist behavior and sexual violence) which may not have been possible to discuss in a mixed-gender group setting.

The criteria for selecting incarcerated participants (partaking in activities and/or work; proficient in French or Dutch) were generally adhered to, but necessitated collaboration with or facilitation by prison staff acting as gatekeepers to provide this information. This selection process inevitably introduced biases concerning the included incarcerated persons. The majority of incarcerated participants were convicted people in their thirties or forties, fluent in either French or Dutch (with the exception of two participants only speaking English). This bias could be attributed to the inclination of staff involved in the sampling process toward detainees capable of articulating their thoughts effectively for interview purposes. Nevertheless, these biases are mitigated to some extent by the purposive sampling of professionals, selected iteratively to address specific research inquiries. The interviews and focus groups were recorded when all participants agreed to it (that is, in all but one focus group and interview), and notes were taken in real-time in all instances.

Before each interview, participants were provided with an informed consent form in either French or Dutch (Flemish), which discussed the aims of the interview or focus group, the pseudonymisation process, the possibility to stop their participation at all stages, and the use of the pseudonymised data for research purposes. It also included the researchers' contact details to be able to answer questions about the study, retract their consent, or obtain published work. All informed consent forms were given in paper, explained verbally at the beginning of the interview or focus group and signed for the in-person interviews and focus groups. For online interviews with practitioners, the informed consent forms were sent via email and a signed copy was sent back, or the consent was obtained verbally after the introduction to it in the beginning of the interview. On one occasion, an incarcerated participant used the contact details on the form to reach out and request the published works derived from the study, which were sent to them.

This study adopted an inductive approach with initial interview topics only delimited to certain sensitizing concepts, and key themes (mixed staff dynamics, rationales for gender segregation, mixed-gender practices, and the management of heterosexual relationships). These emerged as they were discussed by several (groups) of participants were added to the interview topic list for subsequent sessions to refine findings (Blumer, 1954). Interview transcripts and field notebook entries were transcribed and anonymized, then thematically analyzed with regular consultations on identified themes, sub-themes, their scope, and the interrelationships between key concepts (Hemphill & Richards, 2018). The analysis reveals that the discourses of incarcerated persons and staff members regarding mixed-gender practices exhibited remarkable similarity. Consequently, different participant categories are delineated only when necessary in the discussion.

Because data were collected through a combination of formal interviews, focus groups, and informal field conversations, demographic characteristics were not systematically recorded for all participants. In focus groups, we avoided asking about sensitive personal information, such as criminal histories, in front of others, while informal conversations did not allow for standardized collection of demographic or background data. Given the sensitive nature of the research topic and the length of formal interviews (approximately 1.5–2 hours), we also prioritized rapport and avoided unnecessary or intrusive questions. Consequently, participant characteristics and the

⁷In two facilities, only two women showed up for the focus group, hence becoming a double-interview. In one facility, organizational and interpersonal issues rendered it impossible to receive authorization from the governor to conduct a focus group. Hence individual interviews were held by both researchers with the incarcerated women who signed up for the interview. No men were interviewed in this facility.

frequency of reported views on the different themes and sub-themes could not always be systematically quantified across the entire dataset.

FINDINGS: GENDER SEGREGATION IN BELGIAN PRISONS AND ITS EXCEPTIONS

Gender segregation of incarcerated people is the general (and legally defined) organizational principle in Belgian prisons, although mixed-gender practices exist in all institutions that confine both men and women in the form of organized activities by the prison or unsupervised informal contacts between incarcerated persons. First, we describe these organized mixed-gender practices, followed by the unsupervised interactions. Next, we describe the rationales behind their implementation which were given by the prison administration and staff members. Finally, we set out the attitudes of incarcerated people and prison staff toward mixed-gender practices and the rationales behind these practices.

Organized and Supervised Mixed-Gender Practices

There is no mixed-gender housing in any of the Belgian prisons. Mixed-gender activities organized by the prison encompass work, education, and cultural events.⁸ Among the ten prisons examined, three offered mixed work options, while seven provided a varying mixed-gender activities and training programs. In contrast, sports activities were gender segregated in all but one institution. Furthermore, some prisons occasionally host special mixed-gender events, such as annual barbecues, Christmas masses, or concerts. During these planned activities, interactions between incarcerated men and women are strictly regulated and supervised by prison authorities. Indeed, there are no contacts organized between incarcerated men and women in places without immediate supervision by staff, such as the fitness room or the prison yard. The only formalized exceptions to this rule are the unsupervised intimate visits for couples, which are upon request and only authorized under certain conditions.

The Marche-en-Famenne prison stands as a distinctive outlier in this regard. In this prison, mixed-gender practices were a generalized and deliberate initiative since its opening in 2013, with the overarching aim of normalization. Within this institution, work and all activities are available to both incarcerated men and women, including sports, occasionally even in the absence of custodial staff (for instance, badminton or boxing sessions monitored solely by surveillance cameras).

Our research indicates that an increasing number of prisons were attempting to organize mixed-gender activities, but that these initiatives were sometimes discontinued due to the perceived increase in staff workload (attributable to increased movements and the supposed need for heightened surveillance) or following the discovery of sexual acts between participating incarcerated men and women. These circumstances underscore the ad-hoc and volatile nature of prison policy concerning mixed-gender practices.

Spontaneous and Unsupervised Mixed-Gender Practices

Our research has revealed that informal contacts between incarcerated men and women extend well beyond supervised mixed-gender activities organized by the prison. Many informal interactions exist, occurring during routine movements within the prison or within designated areas such as visiting rooms, lawyer consultation spaces, or infirmary waiting areas. Depending on architectural layouts, communication between incarcerated men and women may also transpire through cell windows. Similar interactions were documented by Cardi et al. (2024) in France.

⁸Within the Belgian context, penitentiary work is managed by the prison administration, while all educational, cultural, and sporting activities are organised by external service providers, distinct entities from the prison administration.

Moreover, avenues for written correspondence or discreet exchanges of messages through staff intermediaries and external visitors exist.

Rationales behind the Organization of Supervised Mixed-Gender Practices

Mixed-gender practices arise predominantly either in response to specific constraints or, less commonly, due to the perceived advantages associated with joint participation of incarcerated men and women in mixed activities. Our study discerns three primary categories of practical constraints and one project-driven impetus for the organization of mixed-gender activities.

Firstly, mixed-gender activities often arise as a solution to architectural design and infrastructural limitations, particularly regarding prison work. Notably, mixed-gender work opportunities are systematically provided in facilities without dedicated work spaces for incarcerated women. Conversely, facilities equipped with segregated workshops for women tend to offer limited or no mixed-gender work options.

Secondly, organizational exigencies also prompt the arrangement of mixed-gender activities, for example where external service providers stipulate a minimum participation threshold to justify subsidization. Offering certain educational and cultural activities to both incarcerated men and women then serves a dual purpose: meeting minimum participation quotas and broadening the activity spectrum available to incarcerated women, who constitute a minority cohort whose demands cannot always be catered to.

Thirdly, mixed-gender interactions occur in the form of in-person visits between incarcerated men and women within the same prison. No specific legal framework exists for intra-mural visits, including table visits and unsupervised visits, between incarcerated partners housed within the same prison. They are nevertheless organized with the same eligibility criteria as visits with non-incarcerated visitors. For unsupervised visits, partners must produce evidence of the lasting nature of their relationship status through a prescribed period of correspondence, typically spanning three to six months in accordance with institution-specific protocols. Conversely, visits between partners incarcerated in different facilities are precluded due to logistical constraints pertaining to secure transportation. While incarcerated partners in different prisons sometimes may contact each other through video calls, they might prefer to be placed within the same correctional facility to avail themselves of these in-person visitation modalities. Unless there is a no-contact order from a judge, incarcerated partners can write letters to each other: some prisons agree to send them via free internal mail, others require them to go through the postal system.

Limitations and Safety Perceptions of Incarcerated People regarding Mixed-Gender Attitudes

The vast majority of the participants were in favor (or at least not opposed) to mixed-gender practices taking place in supervised settings. More specifically, only one man and one woman among the 60 interviewed incarcerated people explicitly stated that they preferred non-mixed settings. All incarcerated people and staff members directly asked about it stressed the importance of maintaining a non-mixed offer alongside the mixed-gender offer, for occasions where the demand between men and women differ or when participants prefer to remain in a gender segregated environment. Indeed, several participants—predominantly women in the early stages of their incarceration, though a few men as well—indicated that they deliberately refrain from participating in mixed-gender activities, either due to concerns for their personal safety or because of the negative perceptions surrounding interactions between men and women, as will be further explored below. Certain women also express a preference for gender segregated incarceration amongst women in the first stages of their detention period with later integration into mixed-gender activities.

Regarding the perceptions of safety in mixed-gender work and activities, incarcerated participants generally state the risk of physical and sexual abuse exists, but is limited by the presence of staff, surveillance cameras, and the confined nature of the premises.

It is impossible to make sexual abuse, because there are guards everywhere. What do you make, you don't even have ten seconds with a woman (*laughs from the group*) It's impossible, there are hundreds of cameras everywhere. (Jake, incarcerated man, focus group prison 6, 2023, original in English which was not his native language).

Despite this limited perception of risking physical and sexual violence, incarcerated women have mentioned several forms of gender-based violence (discussed in *The pervasive nature of gender-based violence*). Furthermore, participants were divided on the question whether to include people suspected of or convicted for sexual offenses (PSOs) or gender-based violence in mixed-gender activities. A majority of incarcerated participants argued that the exclusion of men convicted for sexual offenses is a necessary condition for mixed-gender activities to be perceived as safe.⁹ However, most professionals and some incarcerated participants stressed that this would be discriminatory and difficult to implement a formal ban.

In practice, PSOs are not systematically excluded from mixed-gender activities, but might refrain from participating. Several interviewed incarcerated women take part in these activities despite being aware of the presence of PSOs. Even when PSOs do participate in mixed-gender activities, our research shows that some incarcerated men engage in performances of masculinity by assuming the rather chivalrous role of 'protector of women' through the social rejection of PSOs during these activities. Elvire, an incarcerated woman told us: '*Here men ostracize rapists, pedophiles. We are automatically protected.*'¹⁰

This fear of violence however is a real concern and was one of the most prominent reasons for participants' reluctance regarding mixed-gender practices in the places without immediate staff supervision. Incarcerated women generally perceive men's incarceration as more violent; and similarly, men acknowledge that women would be unsafe in places like the yard. Women also cited the fragility of some of their peers—who were homeless or involved in prostitution before imprisonment, or suffer from drug addictions—as a reason they could be easily pressured or exploited by certain men.

DISCUSSION: THE POLITICS OF GENDER SEGREGATION

Our research suggests that gender forms the foundation of a set of norms and organizational principles in prisons, which can be conceptualized as a kind of 'politics'. Drawing on Walker's (2016) study of the politics of racial segregation in prisons in the United States, our findings suggest the existence of similar politics governing gender segregation, despite instances of gender integration through mixed-gender practices and the presence of gender-diverse people within the prison system (Greene, 2023; Sumner & Jenness, 2014; Sumner & Sexton, 2016). These politics dictate the activities available to incarcerated persons, the spaces they are permitted or forbidden to enter, with whom they may interact, their access to resources, and the behaviors expected of them. Our findings demonstrate that men and women are assigned to distinct segregated areas and are prohibited from interacting with one another except under conditions prescribed by the prison authorities. They are afforded access to different types of work, clothing, and other items, and they are required to conform to specific gender norms, particularly in terms of dress and conduct (Carlen, 1983; Carlen & Worrall, 2004; Chetcuti-Osorovitz, 2021; Crewe et al., 2017, 2023; Da Cunha, 2020; Hannah-Moffat, 2001; Moore & Scraton, 2016).

⁹The same attitude was not identified regarding women convicted for sexual offences.

¹⁰Original in French: "*Ici, les hommes ils ostracisent les violeurs, les pédophiles... d'office on est protégées hein.*" (Elvire, incarcerated woman, focus group prison 4, 2022).

The term ‘politics’ was chosen insofar as the rule of separate incarceration for men and women appears to be self-evident and deeply entrenched in prisons. Although the purposes of punishment were not initially part of our scope of research, several incarcerated participants perceive gender segregation to be a completely normal and evident part of imprisonment or punishment in itself. The fact that gender segregation functions as the norm is also exemplified by the highly volatile nature of these initiatives and the lack of any legal framework supporting them. Indeed, mixed-gender initiatives are swiftly stopped as soon as they are under pressure because of an incident (e.g. interaction between men and women going beyond what is expected) or structural factors (lack of staff, infrastructure), returning to the normal situation of gender segregation.

These politics manifest themselves both at an institutional level (gender segregated organization of prisons and regimes), and in interpersonal (micro-relational) level, similarly to the distinction used by Walker (2016). Our research confirms earlier work documenting that these gendered dynamics are not only applied by staff but are also perpetuated by the incarcerated persons themselves (Carlen, 1983; Carlen & Worrall, 2004; Hannah-Moffat, 2001). Both the prison staff and incarcerated people are, in essence, ‘doing gender’ (West & Zimmerman, 1987) within the unique constraints of the prison environment. This phenomenon is exemplified by the hypermasculine ideals prevalent within male prisons and, conversely, the minority status of incarcerated women (Nederlandt & Vanliefde, 2023). The latter group is often disregarded due to their relatively small numbers, with prison work involving women frequently perceived as ‘emotionally demanding,’ often failing to recognize and adequately respond to the multiple layers of vulnerability of incarcerated women past and current life situation (Britton, 2003; Carlen, 1983; Crewe et al., 2023; Nuytiens & Christiaens, 2015).

The interviewed incarcerated women often highlighted the challenges of living exclusively among other women. They frequently articulated a gendered self-deprecating discourse, describing a pervasive culture of gossip and continuous conflict, which they believe contributes to a tense and unhealthy atmosphere in the women’s section. Across various facilities, incarcerated women consistently described their living environment as fostering jealousy, hypocrisy, and an incessant cycle of ‘*gossip, gossip, gossip*.’ It is noteworthy that participants often depicted gossip culture in a negative light as characteristic of women’s sections. However, as Joël (2017) states, gossip is omnipresent in prison—also among incarcerated men and prison staff—and serves important latent functions, including social control and the fostering regular informal human interactions in prison. Moreover, we found that the interviewed incarcerated women often infantilized themselves, referring to one another as ‘girls’ and likening the prison yard to a ‘kindergarten’ (Rowe, 2011).

These underlying gendered assumptions play out beyond perceptions, and translate into politics influencing how prison regimes are organized and how interactions between men and women are managed and policed. Within these politics of gender segregation, mixed-gender practices are perceived as a risk for women and heterosexual relationships are classified into categories that are, or not, tolerated. We describe both aspects of the politics of gender segregation in the following sections.

The Fear of Gender-Based Violence at Face Value: A Justification for Gender Segregation

The perceived risk of gender-based violence against incarcerated women stems from two main perceptions, shared by many interviewed incarcerated people and prison staff members.

Firstly, there is a general perception of pervasive violence in men’s prisons, which is heightened by the fact that some of these men have committed acts of gender-based violence prior to their incarceration. Secondly, there is the perception of incarcerated women being particularly vulnerable, as the majority of them enter detention with a compounded psychological or addiction issues, precarious life situation in terms of social support, housing and/or income, combined

with previous experiences of physical, sexual, or psychological violence during their childhood or in adult relationships (Bartels et al., 2020; Carlen, 1983; Crewe et al., 2023; Doffiny, 2026; Favril, 2024; McCausland & Baldry, 2017; Nuytiens & Christiaens, 2015). This context fosters mistrust of incarcerated men and concern for incarcerated women who, from a vulnerability lens, are perceived as susceptible to falling back into situations of coercion (Lancelevée, 2020). Véronique, an incarcerated woman from prison 3, illustrated this well:

There are many women here who have suffered violence at the hands of their partners. [If there are mixed activities], they'll end up with rapists and men who've beaten their wives. There will be more girls in the grip of men like that.¹¹

These perceptions justify the rule of separate incarceration and the differential treatment of men and women, often to the detriment of the latter. With the exception of Marche-en-Famenne prison, we observed a general tendency among staff to actively minimize contact between men and women. This often takes the form of physically segregating women; they are isolated, escorted, and kept under surveillance. Women's sections are concealed from men's view by covering windows offering a view on them or by locking men up when women are passing through shared spaces to ensure that men cannot see them.

As the incarcerated men who participated in our focus group were about to be released from the room, a door on the same corridor opened to allow a group of women to leave a class. A female prison officer promptly closed the door and lowered the shutter to prevent the men from seeing the women. The men laughed, highlighting the absurdity of the strict separation in light of the theme of the discussion. (Field notes extract from prison 6, 2023)

While men can sometimes freely move around certain prisons to access the gym or various services, women are almost always accompanied by staff in the same prisons. Several participating incarcerated women experienced the staff's exaggerated fear of their interactions with men as infantilizing treatment (Crewe et al., 2023; Hannah-Moffat, 2001).

Managing Heterosexual Relationships: The 'Favorable couple', Discreetness, Stability and Perceived Risks

The aforementioned efforts to limit contacts between incarcerated men and women are closely related to staff's perceptions of tolerated interactions and the fear of intimacy. Our findings suggest that staff and incarcerated persons' attitudes toward mixed-gender practices predominantly stem from preoccupations regarding heterosexual relationships between incarcerated persons. These preoccupations were not voiced regarding same-gender couples, who are recognized to exist but are either invisible or subjected to different expectations. This underscores the pervasiveness of a heteronormative lens with certain expectations which lead to the categorization and management of interactions between men and women. Similarly to how relationships between incarcerated people and staff are perceived as 'good' or 'right' depending on factors such as authority and legitimacy (Liebling & Arnold, 2004; Liebling, 2011), heterosexual relationships between incarcerated persons are also subject to categorization which makes them tolerated or not. Our findings indicate that both incarcerated participants and staff members perceive couples differently based on three criteria: their discreetness, the assumed seriousness and stability of their relationship, and the perceived risks the relationship entails. The assumed fit to the norm of 'the favorable couple' influence prison staff practices, who may either encourage or discourage such relationships by controlling visit permissions or activity enrollments for partners.

¹¹Original in French: "Il y a beaucoup de femmes ici qui ont subi des violences dues à leur compagnon. [En cas d'activités mixtes], elles vont se retrouver avec des violeurs et des hommes qui ont battu leur femme. Y aura à nouveau des filles qui seront sous emprise des hommes comme ça." (Véronique, incarcerated woman, focus group prison 3, 2022).

Both prison staff and incarcerated people generally favor discreet couples, who limit their public displays of affection. Couples are considered to be serious or stable if the relationship predates their incarceration, if they have children together and/or if they are married (even while incarcerated). The seriousness and stability criterion is also embodied in the prison regulations: people requesting unsupervised internal visits must demonstrate the existence of a mutual, legitimate interest over a given period to prove the serious nature of their relationship.¹² Furthermore, relationships between incarcerated men and women are regarded as unfavorable depending on the perceived risks of compromising their future after imprisonment, of creating jealousies and conflicts, and of child conception. Additionally, relationships are also perceived as disturbing to the prison's functioning or to the organization of activities, with certain couples instrumentalizing and disturbing mixed-gender activities, and the possibility of sexual interactions between incarcerated persons during supervised activities.

Relationships between Incarcerated People as a Threat to Future Prospects

Both incarcerated participants as prison staff recognized that companionship in prison can help people to tolerate the hardship of being incarcerated, echoing arguments of incarcerated people's experiences of relationships in Carcedo et al. (2011, 2012). Conversely, when discussing the prospects after incarceration, some relationships between incarcerated people are perceived to potentially compromise their future by hindering reintegration efforts, by recreating abusive relationship dynamics, or 'dragging each other down' by involving their partner in their personal struggles (such as addiction, financial struggles, or continuation of criminal activity). Carine, an incarcerated woman from prison 2, shared that: *'I'll take the example of my two ex-boyfriends who were also using, we were pulling each other down.'*¹³

The Instrumentalization of Mixed-Gender Activities and the Disruptive Presence of Couples

Heterosexual couples are seen as potential sources of conflict when they are unstable or demonstrative. Both staff and incarcerated participants stated that unstable heterosexual relationships, *'couples that come and go'*, are an important source of tension. On the one hand, mixed-gender activities are said to be instrumentalized by incarcerated people, who take part with the sole aim of meeting people of the other gender or seeing their partner (a concern prominent in the French context in Cardi et al., 2024). The staff in charge of the activities mention the increased workload as they have to manage disruptive behaviors, such as chatting, physical closeness, and bringing the focus back to the content of the activity. Demonstrative behaviors of couples, where partners engage in intimate behaviors of varying degrees in front of the other participants, are also found to be disruptive by incarcerated people participating in the activity. Yet, some incarcerated people and staff members expressed their understanding for the craving for physical closeness and intimacy, given the waiting period for access to unsupervised visits. Sandra, a governor from prison 5, acknowledged the pragmatic aspect of such relationships in closed environments as well:

What is the worth of such a relationship? Do we hear the real story when they request an unsupervised visit? It is purely instrumental, and you just take the partner who in that moment best suits your needs, period.¹⁴

¹²For non-married couples, this is often operationalised through proof of communication: text messages or e-mails prior to their incarceration; letters sent through internal or external mail for contacts during their detention period.

¹³Original in French: *"Je vais prendre l'exemple de mes deux ex-compagnons qui consommaient aussi, on se tirait vers le bas, en fait."* (Carine, incarcerated woman, focus group prison 2, 2022).

¹⁴Original in Dutch: *"Wat is de relatie waard? In verhoren [voor ongestoord bezoek], is dat echt? Dat is puur dat instrumenteel en je je neemt gewoon de partner die op dit moment het beste past bij uw behoeften, punt."* (Sandra, prison governor prison 5, individual interview, 2023).

Public displays of affection are generally said to create jealousy among singles (one has access to heterosexual relations, the other is deprived of it) and among those whose partner is outside (one has access to his partner's activities or work in prison in addition to internal visits, the other is limited to formal visits). Interviewed staff members regard those feelings of differential treatment as potential sources of incidents, which in turn generate additional workload for them. Several convicted people expressed being disgruntled when jealousies arise as it creates a tense and violent climate, contrary to their aspiration of calm during their detention period. In addition to jealousy, interviewed staff expressed disapproval of those couples who do not conform to the normative expectations regarding discreetness, expressing the underlying rationale that sexuality in prison has to either be inexistent, or has to remain hidden and confined to the intimate sphere of the cell and unsupervised visits. In the same vein, certain incarcerated participants expressed the concern that if mixed-gender coexistence were to extend beyond organized and supervised activities and work, they would potentially witness scenes of *'unbridled sexuality.'* Fabrice, an incarcerated man in prison 3, expressed his normative expectations on couple stability and 'serious' nature as follows:

Relationships need to be as serious as possible. It shouldn't turn into a hookup spot, you know. Because that's what it could become if [the mixed-gender environment] isn't well regulated. They have to make sure that it's not one week with one person and the next week with another ...¹⁵

Preoccupation of Pregnancy from Intercourse during an Organized Mixed-Gender Activity

A striking and recurrent theme throughout the interviews was prison staff's preoccupation with a pregnancy occurring from intercourse during a mixed-gender activity. The central concern in their discourse does not pertain to the pregnancy or its consequences per se, but rather to the fact that the mixed-gender activity created the conditions for the intercourse to occur, the pregnancy being an undeniable and visible consequence of this, thereby posing potential reputational risks to both the staff and the prison as an institution. While there have been documented instances of incarcerated men and women having intercourse during mixed activities, this preoccupation is also present in the form of rumors which circulate among staff and play an important role in their perception of mixed-gender activities. Alix, a staff member in charge of organizing activities shared they were hindered in organizing mixed-gender activities because of such a rumor:

They [surveillance staff members] resort to this urban legend that a child has been conceived in the classrooms sometime in the past, either through consensual intercourse or as the result of rape. And nobody knows if it is true or not, but that story circulates. And some people use it as an argument: "oh no, we're not going to do that [having men and women together]" or "they're not going to be able to keep their hands off each other." And they try to persuade me [to keep activities gender segregated] without any rational arguments, just based on this strong gut feeling and resentment.¹⁶

The preoccupation with intercourse during an activity resulting in childbearing does not seem to lie in the sexual relationship in itself. Indeed, incarcerated couples with stable relationships do have access to unsupervised visits, which can result in pregnancy. Instead, the fear of conceiving a child outside of these institutionally-organized unsupervised visits seems to be two-fold. On the one hand, it materializes the institution's failure to control sexual relationships in an activity

¹⁵Original in French: "Il faut que les relations soient le plus sérieuses possible. Que ça devienne pas un baisodrome quoi. Parce que ça pourrait le devenir quoi si c'est [la mixité] mal régulé. Pour pas que ça soit une semaine avec l'une et puis une semaine avec l'autre" (Fabrice, incarcerated man, focus group prison 3, 2022).

¹⁶Original in Dutch: "Zij [penitentiair personeel] geven het voorbeeld aan, de urban legend van er zou hier ooit vroeger een verkrachting plaatsgevonden hebben in het lescentrum, of een, geen verkrachting, een gewild kind gemaakt geweest zijn, hé. En dat is iets, of dat het waar is of niet waar, dat weet niemand hé, want dat is zo een verhaal die de ronde doet. Euhm ... en zeker sommige mensen zijn dan van "oei oei oei, we gaan dat toch niet doen" en "ze gaan weer aan elkaar zitten" en ... zonder beredeneerde argumenten, gewoon vanuit het buikgevoel, vanuit de afkeer dat ze daar proberen mij op andere gedachten te brengen" (Alix, staff member coordinating activities, individual interview, 2022).

where it is not allowed in the legal framework. On the other hand, only stable couples have access to these unsupervised visits. The difference in attitudes toward pregnancy resulting from an unsupervised is indicative of the abovementioned hierarchy in the perception of heterosexual couples, where stable and discreet couples are less problematized.

The perceptions of ‘favorable couples’ and the perceived risks associated with relations between incarcerated men and women do not apply to the participants’ perception of same-gender couples. Indeed, our research suggests noteworthy distinctions between heterosexual couples and gay or lesbian couples in perception and in practice. Same-gender relationships are perceived differently and are more invisible, often not talked of (Vanliefde De Keyser, 2025). Where several participants argued same-gender couples often are very discreet out of fear of their relationship being public, others acknowledge that same-gender couples have the opportunity to see each other more often during activities or if they are housed in the same ward or exceptionally in the same cell (Vanliefde De Keyser, 2025). Echoing Sumner and Sexton (2016) work on ‘the dilemma of difference,’ these opportunities were perceived by some as privileges and instances of differential treatment reflecting underlying resentments and jealousies concerning visitation modalities between *intra muros* couples and couples where one partner is not incarcerated.

Participants’ Discourses on the Politics of Gender Segregation

Although participants describe the multiple dimensions of the politics of gender segregation, they also frequently deconstruct its underlying assumptions. First, the notion that gender segregation provides an evident solution to prevent gender-based violence against incarcerated women was challenged by participants’ accounts of diverse forms of such violence, demonstrating its persistence despite the separation of incarcerated men and women. Second, the principle of complete gender segregation was critiqued as contrary to the concept of normalization. Third, the issue of managing couples, often regarded as a central concern for prison staff, was relativized by other staff members and incarcerated persons, who regarded relationships as a normal aspect of incarceration and just one of many issues to be managed.

The Pervasive Nature of Gender-Based Violence

While the interviewed incarcerated women stated that they generally felt protected from physical harm by incarcerated men during supervised mixed-gender activities, they explained that they were not safeguarded against other forms of violence which are dealt with differently or to a lesser extent by staff.

Firstly, incarcerated women frequently reported enduring sexist and sexual comments, as well as repeated unsolicited advances. Several participating women stressed that, given their numerical inferiority in detention, they may be subject to persistent advances from men seeking intimate relations with them, which can turn into harassment, which both staff and incarcerated men acknowledge. For example, Didier, a prison governor from prison 3, shared that:

While the women complain that they’re being hit on a bit too much, but then again, if you have a class with 38 guys and three women, well the 38 are going to try and it’s a bit heavy for the three.¹⁷

Some women shared their strategies to block off undesirable advances, such as using humor, avoiding provocative clothing in mixed-gender spaces, or firmly repeating ‘no’ to certain solicitations. Even when women employ strategies to deter sexist or sexual comments, or explicitly reject such advances, the boundaries they seek to establish are often disregarded. In the following

¹⁷Original in French: “Bah les femmes se plaignent d’être un peu trop draguées, mais bon, c’est de nouveau, si vous avez une classe avec 38 mecs et trois femmes, bah les 38 vont essayer, et c’est un peu lourd pour les trois” (Didier, prison governor, individual interview, prison 3, 2022).

account, Jessica, an incarcerated woman from prison 3, explains how rejecting advances or responding to inappropriate remarks failed to put an end to the behavior. Rather, it resulted in persistent harassment, as she became the target of vindictive rumors.

Some men have tried to get me and I've turned them down flat. Then, to get back at me, they'll spread the rumor that I perform fellatios at the gym for a joint—which is utterly impossible. You see, I have a strong personality... but someone who's weak? (...) I don't care because I know very well what I do and what I don't do, and they're such idiots. So, they start a rumor that's completely untrue, but it still reached the ears of my partner who's in [another remote prison]!¹⁸

Some incarcerated women who fall victim to harassing behavior often find themselves with no alternative but to withdraw from mixed-gender activities when such misconduct remains unaddressed.

Partially countering this unilateral nature of the discourse on sexual interest, several incarcerated women from prison 5 discussed a case where allegations were made of harassment by an incarcerated man, while the concerned woman had been making advances:

Sophie: "Then you've got the ones who provoke people, and when that guy reacts even a little bit... the whole place starts screaming. Yeah, you know..." - *Annie*: "That's what they call provocation." (...) - *Sophie*: "But here it's made to seem as if, well, 'he attacked me.' Sorry, but... we saw what happened before that too." - *Kirsten*: "And at that point, it still wasn't known that she had a cell phone and was sending suggestive photos..."¹⁹

Secondly, several women recount not being allowed by their male partners to participate in mixed-gender work or activities. In numerous instances, these male partners—whether incarcerated in the same facility or elsewhere or not incarcerated—prohibit their female counterparts from engaging with other incarcerated men. Such exertions of control by their partners can lead to women's withdrawal from mixed-gender employment and activities, resulting in social isolation and loss of potential income from prison work.

Thirdly, regardless of whether the women underscored this gender-based violence within the framework of mixed-gender interactions, they consistently highlighted the omnipresent nature of such violence. Outside of mixed-gender activities, women may regularly experience sexist remarks or insults from incarcerated men when they cross paths in the facility during movements or through internal mail. Furthermore, several participants mentioned the occurrence of sexual abuse committed by incarcerated persons of the same gender housed within the same section.

Fourth, several incarcerated participants addressed the responsibility of prison staff in allowing or contributing to forms of gender-based violence. On the one hand, staff may adopt a passive role in the perpetuation of gender-based violence by failing to intervene in cases of sexist or harassing conduct. On the other hand, both incarcerated men and women were mentioned instances where prison staff actively participate in perpetuating gender-based violence. This occurs, for example, when staff disclose personal information about incarcerated women to men, including on their physical appearance or intimate details—going as far as the timing of their menstrual cycles and the types of sanitary products they use—or even their cell numbers, thereby enabling incarcerated men to contact them through letters within the prison. One incarcerated woman poignantly remarked that they *'feel like fresh meat.'* Numerous incarcerated participants

¹⁸Original in French: "Certains hommes ont essayé de m'avoir et j'ai remballé sec. Après, pour se venger, ils vont raconter que je les suce à la salle de sport pour un joint – ce qui, déjà, est impossible. Vous voyez, moi j'ai un caractère fort... Mais quelqu'un qui est faible? Qui n'est pas bien dans sa peau? [...] Moi je m'en fous complètement parce que je sais très bien ce que je fais et ce que je ne fais pas et puis il sont tellement cons. Donc, ils lancent une rumeur qui est complètement fausse mais c'est quand même arrivé aux oreilles de mon compagnon qui est à [autre prison éloignée] hein! Donc vous imaginez." (Jessica, incarcerated woman, focus group prison 3, 2022).

¹⁹Original in Dutch: *Sophie*: "Je hebt er dan die uitdagen, en als dieje man dan eens zo doet . dan heel het kot bij mekaar krijsen. Ja, weete..." - *Annie*: "Dat noemen ze uitlokking" (...) *Sophie*: "Maar hier is dat dan precies alsof, ja hij viel mij aan. Ja sorry, maar. wat daar aan vooraf ging hebben wij ook gezien." *Kirsten*: "Toen was het ook nog niet geweten dat ze een GSM had en dat ze pikante foto's doorstuurde..." (focus group with incarcerated women, prison 5, 2022).

emphasized their perception of the staff's lack of professionalism and inadequate training, alongside concerns about inappropriate interference in their personal lives, as is illustrated by Elvire, an incarcerated woman from prison 3:

The lack of respect and all that doesn't come from incarcerated men. Quite the contrary. [...] It is from the male and female staff who have zero training, who have no respect for anyone. It's them who create problems to be able to say: "see, mixing men and women doesn't work."²⁰

Finally, although such cases are exceptional, participants from several institutions reported on instances of sexual abuse perpetrated by male prison officers against incarcerated women. In some cases, these were qualified as grave abuses of power wherein officers offered benefits in exchange for sexual favors (similar to Buchanan, 2007; Owen et al., 2008; Saliba, 2013). Jessica, from prison 3 as well, observed several of these interactions between prison staff and certain incarcerated women:

They [prison officers] bring things in exchange, cigarettes for example. They buy and target these poor girls who don't have any money, especially to buy cigarettes.²¹

These findings suggest that while gender segregation may shield incarcerated women from direct physical violence inflicted by incarcerated men, it proves inadequate in addressing other forms of violence, including sexual comments and solicitations, harassment, and abusive relationships with intimate partners. Furthermore, it offers no protection against gender-based violence either facilitated or perpetrated by prison staff or incarcerated people in the same unit. As a result, gender segregation is regarded as a preventive yet ultimately superficial measure in mitigating the risk of gender-based violence against incarcerated women.

Normalization as an Argument to Question the Politics of Segregation

The ostensibly self-evident rationale underpinning the politics of gender segregation was often challenged by participants through the principle of normalization. A substantive group of participants drew comparisons with broader society, asserting that mixed-gender environments ought to be the standard within the prison system, mirroring the gender integration prevalent in free society. Incarcerated participants highlighted the omnipresence of mixed-gender spaces and interactions in society and other institutions they had previously encountered, such as schools and addiction rehabilitation centers. In their view, a prison regime excessively divergent from the norms of free society can impede their prospects for successful reintegration. As stated by Fabienne, an incarcerated woman from prison 2:

The world isn't made up of only women. The world is made up of men and women. So why create a prison that doesn't resemble the world? Why remove us from the world? Because by distancing us from everything that makes up the world, they marginalize us.²²

Furthermore, both staff members and incarcerated participants criticized the recurrent reduction of interactions between incarcerated men and women to sexuality exclusively, and highlighted the positive contributions that interactions between men and women can foster. On the one hand, mixed-gender environments offer opportunities for new social encounters, a crucial

²⁰Original in French: "Le problème de manque de respect et tout ça ne vient pas de la part des détenus hommes. Bien au contraire. [...] C'est de la part du personnel masculin et féminin qui n'ont aucune formation, qui n'ont aucun respect. C'est eux qui créent les problèmes pour dire "vous voyez la mixité ça ne marche pas" (Elvire, incarcerated woman, focus group prison 3, 2022).

²¹Original in French: "Ils [les agents pénitentiaires] apportent des choses, des cigarettes par exemple. Ils les achètent quoi, mais c'est des pauvres filles qui n'ont pas de sous, spécialement pour acheter leurs cigarettes" (Jessica, incarcerated woman, focus group prison 3, 2022).

²²Original in French: "Le monde n'est pas fait avec que des femmes. Le monde il est fait avec des hommes et des femmes. Pourquoi faire une prison qui ne ressemble pas au monde? Pourquoi nous enlever du monde? Parce que, en nous éloignant de tout ce qui compose le monde, on nous marginalise." (Fabienne, incarcerated woman, individual interview, prison 2, 2022).

advantage for women detained in small units of 20 to 40 individuals, as it enables them to engage with a broader pool of people beyond their immediate cohort. On the other hand, interviewees recognized gender diversity, much like other forms of diversity—such as ethnicity, language, and faith—can enrich discussions, and promote a climate of tolerance within the prison setting.

In a similar vein, certain mixed-gender activities were recognized for their potential to mitigate gender stereotypes in the regime. In the Marche-en-Famenne prison for example, women were afforded the opportunity to participate in traditionally male-dominated activities such as boxing, while men could engage in dance classes or yoga. Incarcerated participants noted that mixed-gender environments enabled them to transcend gendered conversation topics; men found it easier to discuss topics conventionally considered feminine, such as family and childcare, with women, while women valued the opportunity to move beyond discussions primarily centered on relationships.

However, these general statements must be nuanced as a small but significant amount of incarcerated people expressed a clear preference for gender segregated environments. Moreover, the vast majority of participants were in favor of limiting mixed-gender practices to activities and work, while allowing a non-mixed option to coexist alongside a mixed one. The general support among participants to maintain a non-mixed offer alongside a mixed one was also justified with reference to the principle of normalization: this reflects free society, where both options coexist. Yet, an important structural limitation to this comparison between prison and free society was observed by Mark, an incarcerated man from prison 5:

Mark: “Yeah, jealousy, frustrations, and... and you always have that, but here you’re living much closer together, I think. In the outside world it’s different...” – *Interviewer:* “Right, outside you can physically get away from each other... here you can’t...” – *Mark:* “Exactly! That’s it! Here you’re constantly on top of each other and, yeah, if two men or two women are in love with the same person, that can definitely cause tensions.”²³

This suggests that the management of relationships is intrinsically linked with the specific environment of the prison, a problem of which the salience is the consequence of the politics of gender segregation which govern these interactions.

Unsupervised Heterosexual Relationships as a ‘Normal Problem?’

Although the management of heterosexual couples where both partners are incarcerated was a recurrent preoccupation within the discourses of prison staff, many participants—such as Didier, a prison governor from prison 3—acknowledged that relationships are in fact a normal phenomenon in any closed environment, both with those incarcerated as with prison staff members: such as Didier, a prison governor,

Our main concern is managing couples [of incarcerated people]. They come and go with the tides. But, again, I have the same issue in the staff, I have the same thing in the administration. (...) It’s a bit annoying, but that’s what you’ll find again in any closed or pseudo-closed environment: youth centers, etc. You’ll always find the same situation. You’re always going to find Madeleine is with Xavier, oh no, now she’s with Whatshisname, that’s it, that’s the way it is.²⁴

²³Original in Dutch: Mark: “Ja, jalousie, frustraties en ... en je hebt dat altijd maar hier zit je ook wat dichter bij elkaar denk ik ... in de buitenwereld is dat nog iets anders...” – Interviewer: “Ja, buiten kunt ge fysiek van elkaar weg ... hier niet?” Mark: “Ja! Voilà! Hier is het zo op elkaar en, ja, dat ge met twee mannen of twee vrouwen op ene iemand verliefd zijt, dan kan dat wel voor wrijvingen zorgen he.” (Mark and researcher, focus group with incarcerated men prison 5, 2022).

²⁴Original in French: “Ce qu’on a comme souci majeur ce sont les couples. Qui se font et se défont selon les marées montantes et descendantes. Mais, de nouveau, j’ai la même chose dans le personnel, j’ai la même chose dans le pôle administratif, si vous voulez savoir qui est avec qui, etc. Je peux vous donner plein de renseignements. Ça n’a aucun intérêt, mais enfin. Mais donc voilà, on a des couples qui se forment et se déforment, c’est un peu ennuyeux mais c’est de nouveau ce que vous allez retrouver dans tout milieu fermé ou pseudo fermé: centres pour jeunes, internats, etc. Vous allez tout le temps retrouver Madeleine est avec Xavier, ah non, maintenant elle est avec truc voilà, bon c’est comme ça.” (Didier, prison governor, individual interview, prison 3, 2022).

Moreover, several participants emphasized the jealousy and conflict, which often attributed to the presence of couples, are in fact pervasive in prison settings due to a variety of other underlying causes. The tensions stemming from unequal access to heterosexual relationships are but one aspect of a broader environment rife with conflicts arising from inequitable treatment. Prisons, by their very nature, bring together individuals in precarious circumstances who are compelled to compete for access to scarce essential resources that are inequitably distributed. These resources include access to staff (such as governors, social workers, and medical personnel), access to prison work (crucial for the purchase of goods, payment of telephone bills, television rentals, etc.), participation in activities (with limited availability), and access to single-occupancy cells.

Limitations to Mixed-Gender Practices in Prison: The Persistence of Gender Norms and Inequalities

In this final section, we critically reflect on the limitations of mixed-gender practices in prison, highlighting the persistence of binary gender norms and inequalities that ultimately impede their transformative potential.

The Perpetuation of a Binary Understanding of Gender through the Politics of Gender Segregation

While the implementation of mixed-gender practices in incarceration settings has the potential to deconstruct certain gender norms by offering a broader range of activities that are less stereotypical, our research findings indicate that these normative expectations largely persist. For instance, men in mixed-gender groups were reported by prison staff to ‘calm down’ in the presence of women, while women were observed to ‘gossip’ less when men were present. Such narratives reveal the deep-rooted nature of gendered expectations in interactions between incarcerated men and women, where men are still perceived as less calm and women are still criticized for engaging in gossip.

This discussion illustrates that mixed-gender practices alone are insufficient to dismantle entrenched gender stereotypes unless they are embedded within a critical reassessment of the cis-normative and binary understanding of gender and its pervasive influence on prison organization. The strict binary classification within prisons has also been shown to have particularly detrimental effects on the experiences of transgender, non-binary, and gender-diverse individuals (Jenness et al., 2019; Maycock, 2022; Sumner & Jenness, 2014; Sumner & Sexton, 2016; Vanliefde & Maras, 2023). Research into the experiences of incarcerated transgender and gender-diverse persons highlights that their presence disrupts the very foundation of rigid (binary) gender segregation, exposing the inadequacies of gender segregated systems in addressing the needs of individuals who do not conform to binary gender categories (Jenness et al., 2019; Maycock, 2022; Maycock et al., 2024; Sumner & Sexton, 2016).

While mixed-gender practices may offer transgender and gender-diverse people opportunities to participate in activities which are not exclusively catered to either incarcerated men or women, they do not fundamentally challenge prisons’ entrenched gender norms (Greene, 2023). Furthermore, for some transgender, non-binary, and gender-diverse persons, participation in mixed-gender activities may be fraught with trauma. An interviewed transgender woman, for example, recounted feeling unsafe around men due to prior experiences of sexual abuse in prison, leading her to avoid mixed-gender activities.

Limits and Conductive Contexts for Mixed-Gender Practices

As policies regarding mixed-gender practices change quickly, showcasing their constant (re)negotiation and importance in the daily organization of prison life, contextual factors are essential in understanding the dynamics behind their implementation.

Firstly, an important explanation for the highly volatile nature of mixed-gender practices is that there is little room for reflection or vision on their implementation, given the permanent state of crisis in the Belgian prison system with severe overcrowding, staffing shortages, and outdated infrastructure which constitute more acute and urgent issues.

Second, our findings suggest that prisons with a high population of pretrial detainees and rapid turnover provide less conducive environments for mixed-gender initiatives. The high levels of stress experienced by pretrial detainees, coupled with their limited trust in prison staff and fellow incarcerated persons, particularly hamper these efforts. Certain incarcerated women expressed relief at being ‘among women’ during the initial months of their imprisonment, as exemplified by Stephanie, an incarcerated woman from prison 3:

It [the offense she committed] happened just last Friday evening and I am constantly moved around since then. I haven’t been able to settle and I’m going to court tomorrow. [...] It’s good to be here with them [the other incarcerated women] because they understand me very well and there is a lot of respect in between us.²⁵

This observation aligns with Walker’s (2016) findings that the degree of racialization lessens with familiarity and involvement with the prison, in the case of trustees and convicted people in the trustee pods. Similarly, the politics of gender seem to become less pervasive with sentenced people who have already adapted to the institution and have built interpersonal relationships and trust with staff and other incarcerated people. However, it is in large, overcrowded prisons with a high turnover of pretrial detainees that attempts to organize mixed-gender activities were frequently perceived as doomed from the outset. For some staff members, these failed initiatives might reinforce skepticism, serving as a necessary validation for the perception that mixing incarcerated men and women ‘*just does not work*.’

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Mixed-gender practices in Belgian prisons, while present, are largely confined to education, work, and occasional events. Policies regarding mixed-gender practices differ between prisons and are highly volatile, as evidenced by the intermittent introduction and cessation of mixed-gender practices following minor incidents. This volatility indicates that mixed-gender practices are the exception which uncovers the underlying politics of gender segregation which govern the daily lives of incarcerated people in terms of accommodation, access to services and resources and expectations regarding their behavior in conforming to gender norms (Greene, 2023; Mathiassen, 2017; Resnik, 1982). In light of evolving societal norms and the growing focus on gender issues, equality, diversity, and recognition, the politics of gender segregation in prisons are increasingly challenged by the existence of mixed-gender practices and by the presence of gender-diverse people in prisons (Sumner & Sexton, 2016).

Staff and incarcerated participants’ attitudes toward and discourses regarding mixed-gender practices have uncovered a profound preoccupation of prison authorities with controlling interactions between incarcerated men and women. These interactions are viewed almost exclusively through the lens of their potential sexual relationships and the risk for gender-based violence. Heterosexual relationships between incarcerated men and women are closely assessed and tolerated based on their stability, discreetness and perceived risks the relationship entails for both parties. The risk of gender-based violence remains the primary justification for maintaining gender segregation policies, which reflects deeply entrenched, gendered, and heteronormative views of men-on-women violence among incarcerated persons (Resnik, 1982). These assumptions,

²⁵Original in French: “Moi je suis... ça s’est passé vendredi soir et depuis c’est... partout tout le temps et je ne me suis pas encore posé en fait et demain je repasse devant le juge ... (...) Non mais en fait c’est bien parce qu’elles me comprennent beaucoup et, enfin... et il y a beaucoup de respect entre-nous.” (Stéphanie, incarcerated woman, focus group prison 3, 2022).

however, overlook violence occurring between individuals of the same gender, violence directed toward gender-diverse persons, and violence perpetrated by staff against incarcerated persons. These various forms of violence which exist despite gender segregation policies suggest that addressing gender-based violence necessitates a comprehensive policy encompassing all aspects of prison life. Such policies may include mixed-gender practices, all the while recognizing the safety risks that those practices entail and maintaining gender segregated spaces (in terms of accommodation and activities) for incarcerated people who prefer to not engage in mixed-gender interactions for a variety of reasons. Ultimately, the fundamental question pertains to the capacity and underlying failures of penal institutions to protect those in their care beyond symptomatic responses in the shape of gender-related policies, which potentially perpetuating cycles of harm (Tubex & Gately, 2025) and experiences of violence for incarcerated women.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

CRedit: **Olivia Nederlandt**: Conceptualization, Investigation, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Aurore Vanliefde De Keyser**: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work the authors used ChatGPT 4.0 for assistance in translating, refining or rephrasing and spell-checking parts of the text. The authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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