



# Even Wonder Woman Couldn't Do It All: The Impacts of Superwoman Syndrome on Women with Incarcerated Partners

Alexis. Gregorash<sup>1</sup>  
Eman. Tadros<sup>2\*</sup>  
Anha. Jhuremalani<sup>3</sup>

1. Ph.D Candidate, Division of Psychology and Counseling, Governors State University, Illinois, USA
2. \*Corresponding author: Assistant Professor, Division of Psychology and Counseling, New York, Illinois, USA
3. Division of Psychology and Counseling, Columbia University, New York, USA

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## Abstract

Incarceration affects approximately 2 million individuals, with about half the male population reporting they are in an intimate relationship; causing non-incarcerated partners to experience various stressors and challenges. Specific to women, there is a phenomenon called “Superwoman Syndrome,” which refers to various the roles women take on such as caregiver, partner, career woman, and breadwinner. This may lead to higher rates of stress and dissatisfaction, decreased family functioning, and dysfunctional patterns. This can also exacerbate feelings of resentment, dissatisfaction, and inundation, proliferating into negative feelings towards the family unit. Partner incarceration can exasperate these impacts, leading to higher rates of stress and other mental health concerns. Our goal is to address the lacunae in literature regarding the social, emotional, financial, and systemic needs of females with incarcerated partners, through advocacy of policy changes. Further, empirical exploration and research into this population can help to mitigate some of the negative effects, and produce better outcomes for both individual women, and their families.

**Keywords:** *incarceration, superwoman syndrome, race, mental health, women.*

## Introduction

Presently, there are 2.3 million people imprisoned in the United States (U.S.), including juvenile facilities, local county jails, immigration detention centers, Indian country jails, and state and federal prisons (Wagner & Sawyer, 2020). Almost half of the male prison population reported cohabitating with their partner before incarceration, and the bulk of incarcerated males define themselves as being in an intimate relationship. Additionally, 5.2% of state and federal incarcerated individuals are parents of children under 18 (Harman et al., 2007). From 1991 to 2007, the population of incarcerated fathers in the U.S. expanded by 70%, and the number of imprisoned mothers jumped by 131%, disrupting parent-child relationships (Beckmeyer & Arditti, 2014). While the rate of incarceration of women is twice that of men, the number of males in prison is still substantially higher than the number of females in prison (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2022). Consequently, leaving the majority of nuclear families affected by incarceration to be headed by single mothers.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the residual effects female partners of color have to take on when their male partners are incarcerated. The consequences these additional responsibilities for women are part of the phenomenon known as, “superwoman syndrome.” To address the spillover effects of incarceration, our recommendation is to implement policy changes within the correctional system that limits financial and psychological constraints, while improving visitation, which can be addressed using a family feminist therapy lens. Therefore, this paper will review current literature to examine the emotional, financial, systemic, and healthcare needs and concerns of this population (Bruns, 2019, 2020; Blankenship et al., 2018; Chui, 2010; Lindquist et al., 2020) to provide clinical and policy recommendations.

## Superwoman Syndrome

*Superwoman Syndrome* is the phenomenon in which women feel the need to partake in various full-time roles such as maintaining her career, her home, her relationship, caring for her children, and financially contributing to the household (American Psychological Association, n.d.). Over the past half-century, women have flooded the workforce, yet they have simultaneously been expected to maintain their traditional roles of homemaker and caretaker; leading to high rates of stress and dissatisfaction for these women (Abrams et al., 2014; Herrera & DelCampo, 1995; Newell, 1993; Temple & Colletto, 1988). Given these higher rates of stress and dissatisfaction, family functioning faces severe impacts of developing dysfunctional patterns (Herrera & DelCampo, 1995; Tadros & Ansell, 2022; Tadros & Durante, 2022; Tadros, Durante, et al., 2022). Which can lead to feelings of resentment, dissatisfaction, and inundation, proliferating into negative feelings towards the family unit (Herrera & DelCampo, 1995).

For instance, there is a notion that housework has been divided equally amongst partners, as women have entered the workforce. However, this idea has been found to be empirically untrue, and is a foundational piece in the creation of Superwoman Syndrome. Generally, men and women fall into traditional gender roles (i.e. women spending more time tending to the home and children), despite more and more women obtaining college degrees and full-time jobs (Evertsson & Neramo, 2007; Nitsche & Grunow, 2016). One study found that on average, employed men spent between an hour on housework and about fourteen minutes on childcare a day, whereas employed women averaged about four hours on housework and an hour on childcare a day; displaying the inequitable split of housework between men and women (Evertsson & Neramo, 2007; Nitsche & Grunow, 2016; Temple & Colletto, 1988). This means that between two full-time employed partners, women spend about 26 more hours a week on traditional roles than men. While there has been some research indicating a more egalitarian split in housework, literature suggest that overall, women generally spend more time on housework than men, and consequently, experience less leisure time (Gupta & Ash, 2008; Hare-Mustin, 1984; Newell, 1993; Sumra & Schillaci, 2015; Temple & Colletto, 1988). This demand for engaging in various roles and navigating the stressors that come along with them.

### ***Incarceration Impacts on Female Partners***

As noted, when women are placed into this role of being a Superwoman, there are a multitude of stressors that ensue. Having an immediate family member who is incarcerated can produce problems like financial instability, emotional concerns, mental and physical health issues, and parenting difficulties. Prior to incarceration, it is estimated that men contribute about 50% of the total household income; meaning that once an individual is imprisoned, the family loses a significant percentage of their income, resulting in the need to utilize public assistance, or for women to take on multiple jobs to make up for that income loss (Bruns, 2019). Additionally, with incarceration there are extra costs accrued with visitation. Virtual visitation creates its own costs, with the use of various communication platforms (Charles et al., 2021; Cochran et al., 2017). Therefore, income that would normally be put into the household will now go to the person in prison, to help them buy things they need (Bruns, 2019; Cochran et al., 2017; Provencher & Conway, 2019; Schwartz-Soicher et al., 2011). Thus, leaving non-incarcerated individuals to seek extra income to support their families and their incarcerated loved one.

In addition to financial concerns, there are emotional stressors to be considered when a woman experiences the incarceration of her partner. Emotional stress can occur because everyone else in the family now has to fill the void that the incarcerated person has left behind (Arditti, 2003). Prior research has shown that the entire family system becomes disrupted as roles often need to be shifted or

renegotiated (Tadros, Durante, et al., 2022; Tadros & Finney, 2018, 2019; Tadros, Fanning, et al., 2021). This is due to the incarcerated individuals' physical separation from the family and loss of financial earning-power, disrupting the existing roles (Tadros & Ogden, 2020). This interference can occur with emotional roles or due to non-incarcerated female partners having to adopt the role of primary caregiver, as well as main breadwinner (Tadros, Fanning, et al., 2021). These shifts in roles create stress for the non-incarcerated partner due to loss of income or support, which requires the non-incarcerated female partner to acquire additional tasks, resulting in additional stressors to be managed.

Incarceration of a family member can also cause mental and physical health issues. Research has shown that children and adults with an incarcerated family member have poorer health outcomes, costing over \$22 billion for adults and over \$340 million in children. (Provencher & Conway, 2019). Coping with the incarceration of a loved one can be difficult because incarceration costs families time together and imposes financial burdens (Bruns, 2019, 2020). Additionally, it negatively affects the health of the family members who aren't incarcerated (Provencher & Conay, 2019; Tadros, Durante, et al., 2022; Wildeman et al., 2019). For instance, when women have to take on various roles, such as income provider and single parent, stress-induced health conditions such as weakened immune system, diabetes, high blood pressure, and risk of coronary heart disease ensue (Sumra & Schillaci, 2015). Thus, transitioning internal concerns to external problems.

There are a multitude of other stressors that can also exacerbate the effects of Superwoman Syndrome. For instance, parents may not be in the position, nor afford to call off work, to supervise their child every time the child is suspended. This inflicts stress on the family and parents, especially if the parents are racially minoritized and live in lower income communities (Roettger & Boardman, 2012). Caregivers have discussed the negative impacts of suspensions on family-school relationships and their subsequent trust and willingness to work with educators (Haight et al., 2016). When women with incarcerated partners experience stressors such as this, they are placed in a situation where they need to find care for their children, which could result in missed work, and therefore missed income. Thus, reinforcing the role of Superwoman Syndrome, and the need to care for the family independently.

Another area of concern for women is the role of caregiver. Depending on the family member that is incarcerated, the caregiver could be the other parent, an immediate or extended family member, or a non-relative like a romantic partner, foster parent, or adoptive parent (Glaze, 2010; Tasca, 2016). However, mothers are most often the primary caregivers for children with an incarcerated father (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Caregivers can experience varying stressors after a parent is physically removed from a child's life due to incarceration (Loper et al., 2014). For example, the caregiver must directly take care of the child's developmental, academic, and social challenges while also balancing economic and social stressors

from having a relationship with a parent in jail or in prison (Arditti, 2003; Hanlon, 2007; Loper et al., 2014; Schwartz-Soicher et al., 2011). Navigating these challenges can inflict additional difficulties for women, resulting in additional stress and dissatisfaction (Newell, 1993; Temple & Colletto, 1988).

### ***Racial Implications***

People of color, particularly Black and Latino individuals, are significantly overrepresented in jails and prisons across the United States (Blankenship et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2016; Nellis, 2016). In fact, African American and Latino men comprise over 60% of the state and federal prison populations (Lee et al., 2016). For African American men, approximately 100,000 out of the 300,000 individuals that are US residents are imprisoned (Blankenship et al., 2018). Latino men are also increasingly becoming the fastest rate of incarcerated males in prisons (Lee et al., 2016). In fact, this disproportionate level of incarceration of racial minoritized individuals negatively impacts children and widens the gap between class equality (Wildeman & Western, 2010). Therefore, creating additional stressors and inequitable opportunities for families of color.

As noted previously, women with incarcerated partners experience higher levels of financial instability, health problems, emotional concerns, parental responsibility, and maintenance of a relationship with the incarcerated individual (Arditti, 2003; Bruns, 2019; Hanlon, 2007; Schwartz-Soicher et al., 2011; Tadros, Fanning, et al., 2021; Wildeman & Western, 2010). Having to navigate these various roles fosters the development of superwoman syndrome with women of color. For instance, African American women are generally perceived as having to be, “strong,” resulting in the stereotype that they need to support their families themselves, thrive with limited resources, hide fears and vulnerabilities, all while meeting external expectations (Abrams et al., 2014). Additionally, over the past few decades, the influx of Latina women in the workforce has exasperated the Superwoman Syndrome phenomenon. Much of this is attributed to the reported stress of Latina women in balancing the roles of wife, mom, and employee, causing dissatisfaction and conflict (Abrams et al., 2014; Herrera & DelCampo, 1995). Thus, suggesting a need for further research and advocacy for these populations experiencing additional social and economic constraints.

### **Barriers and Challenges**

There are multiple barriers and challenges faced by partners of incarcerated individuals. These include levels of stress, economic strain, stigma and discrimination, parental responsibilities, as well as housing insecurity. First, women often deal with feelings of isolation, anxiety, fear, and powerlessness; these emotions stem from stigmatization of having an incarcerated partner, resulting in women feeling as though they are unable to confide in others (Tyler & Brockmann, 2017). Additionally, an increase in marital divorce or separation can lead to intense

distress and depressive symptoms as a result of partner incarceration, specifically, in regard to family disconnection and lack of contact (Lopoo & Western, 2005; Poehlmann, 2005). The impact of stigma and subsequent burdens placed on sisters with incarcerated brothers as well as female partners of incarcerated males has been documented in the literature (Tadros et al., 2020, 2022). Stigmatization can prevent these women from seeking professional help, and may also lead to greater societal barriers such as decreased opportunities for employment and social interactions.

In regards to economic strain, Bruns (2020) concluded that men, prior to incarceration, contribute to upwards of 50% of household income. Thus, upon incarceration, most women experience immense financial burden, with significant reductions in income. In addition, most families of inmates are from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, and therefore incarceration compounds financial difficulties (Chui, 2010). Visitation procedures and other related policies can further exacerbate these hardships due to cost of transportation, phone-calls, legal bills, and child support (Arditti et al., 2003). Partners of incarcerated individuals are left with no other option but public assistance, which can lead to disempowerment and other forms of psychological distress (Bruns, 2019, 2020).

### **Clinical Implications**

As aforementioned, incarcerated men are limited in financial contribution and parental decision-making, due to the restrictions of involvement with the criminal justice system (Datchi et al., 2016; Tadros & Ogden, 2020). Which may include correctional facility restrictions, or not having a steady income. Therefore, these men are forced to rely on non-incarcerated co-parents, family members, or other individuals to continue contact with their children (Datchi et al., 2016). Thus, adding various layers of complexity to the relationship between parents, as well as additional responsibilities. Given the entanglement of these concerns, addressing them in a therapeutic setting may be beneficial. Often times, extra financial, parental, and emotional burdens are placed with the female partner of the incarcerated individual, which can lead to both physical and mental health issues caused by stress (Arditti, 2003; Bruns, 2019; Hanlon, 2007; Sumra & Schillaci, 2015; Tadros, Fanning, et al., 2021; Tadros, Durante, et al., 2022; Wildeman & Western, 2010). Given the difficulties women face while their male partners are incarcerated, a feminist family therapy lens may be most beneficial in working with these women.

Traditionally, men are viewed as the economic providers for the family, and women are the homemakers, even when holding jobs outside of the home (Hare-Mustin, 1984). While women have entered the workforce more abundantly over the past few decades, there are still gender roles in place that create additional stressors for women in families, especially when their male counterparts are incarcerated (Herrera & DelCampo, 1995; Newell, 1993; Tadros, Durante, et al., 2021; Temple

& Colletto, 1988). Given the additional roles women have to take on when their partner is incarcerated, while simultaneously adhering and navigating the gender-roles socially assigned to women, feminist family therapy may be an advantageous therapeutic approach.

The primary goal of feminist family therapy is to empower clients to recognize and dismantle gender-stereotypes to create balance and egalitarian relationships (Umamaheswar & Tadros, 2021). Feminist family therapy can be implemented in various techniques such as creating an egalitarian relationship between family members and the therapist, shifting division of labor within households, acknowledging and addressing habitual communication patterns, strengthening relationships between members equally, limiting triangulation, and encouraging women to take ownership of various aspects of their lives (Hare-Mustin, 1984). Each of these techniques can be valuable in helping women navigate the various roles they undertake when experiencing partner incarceration, as they instill empowerment, self-confidence, and can teach various skills such as delegation, validation, and communication; all of which are critical for working in a therapeutic setting with these women.

### **Policy Implications**

This research can inform key policies that aid with parenting during incarceration. More specifically, policymakers can reframe prison establishments to foster positive family relationships and child welfare. One example of change can be through visitation policies. Most families have unfavorable experiences and often encounter hostile and intimidating conditions that prevent future contact (Arditti, 2012). For instance, visitation can result in an unequal punishment towards minority groups, via consequences of disproportionate sentences and behavioral evaluations (Cochran et al., 2017). Additionally, child development is greatly affected by this dynamic. Without the presence of an active father figure, there is additional strain on mothers to play both roles, emotionally and financially (Arditti, 2003; Bruns, 2019). For example, interventions that increase father-child interactions, such as more accessible visitation and use of written and audiovisual communications, can ease the parental responsibility of the mother (Charles et al., 2019).

In regards to the emotional and financial burden placed on women of incarcerated partners, policymakers should ensure that sufficient and immediate psychological and financial support is offered. Furthermore, family members should be well informed of how to obtain counseling services and emergency relief (Chui, 2010). For example, parenting programs, such as relationship counseling, have been shown to strengthen family bonds post incarceration (Lindquist et al., 2020). Similarly, prison programs that provide employment to incarcerated fathers can be made more readily available, such that child support is offered during incarceration and the economic burden is lessened. In this vein, policies can be targeted at

providing consistent child support, whereby payments to the child receive priority over any repayments to the government (Geller et al., 2011). Lastly, there may be programs which increase incentives (e.g., tax incentives) to hire formerly incarcerated individuals, which would contribute toward shared parental responsibilities.

Policy reforms can also be made in corrections at the macro-level. Increasing social welfare in a manner that intersects with correctional policies, can be beneficial for both incarcerated individuals and those in their communities (Lee et al., 2016). This could include sentencing policies that would yield diminished populations in prison, while maintaining public safety (Wildeman & Western, 2010). For instance, reform of post-incarceration supervision (i.e. parole and probation) can impact the diverse social, economic, health, and psychological needs (Blankenship et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2016). It is known that when post-incarcerated individuals return to environments with limited resources, economic disadvantages, high crime rates, and restrictive correctional policies, there is an increase in those individuals re-entering the prison system (Lee et al., 2016). Additionally, minority communities are often hyper-surveilled by police presence, which can result in skewed crime rates, community unrest (i.e. police-samaritan shootings), and ultimately an increase in stress-induced related health issues. (Blankenship et al., 2018). Current correctional policies not only affect individuals, but infiltrate into communities making it a social concern. Therefore, addressing the specific needs of communities and understanding the intersection of the criminal justice system, can assist in establishing policies that are more equitable and promote both individual and societal success.

### **Future Directions**

When elevating the curiosity and empathic take on conducting research with this population, it is recommended to explore more meaningful and efficacious services for families impacted by incarceration. It is important to urge that future research considers the experiences of children, co-parents, and romantic partners affected by incarceration, and how that impacts the family system. Thus, it is necessary that future research uses empirical methods to examine the implications of incarceration on the couple relationship, as well as the entire family system. This would additionally further inform their mental health treatment and reintegration into society.

In addition to creating more accessible services for families, it is also critical to explore services that are gender-specific, and target the struggles experienced by women with incarcerated partners. This includes exploring empirically based therapeutic interventions in working with these women, as well as addressing gaps in resources such as child care, financial assistance, and social supports. Addressing the challenges and barriers that face this population can help restore family structure and functioning, while simultaneously reducing other concerns



stemming from incarceration and family separation. Further research in this area can create more positive outcomes that affect both individuals and families, resulting in better mental health, physical health, social, and economic results.

### **Conclusion**

The phenomenon of “Superwoman Syndrome,” while a relatively new term, is a notion that impacts a large population of women, specifically those of minority status and with incarcerated partners. Mitigating the residual implications of having an incarcerated partner, such as financial strain, emotional distress, family dysregulation, additional housework, and health concerns, through changes in numerous systemic policies, can create more efficacious prevention strategies for these underrepresented, female populations. As clinicians and healthcare professionals, advocating for policy change to improve the lives of others is critical in our work and professional identity. Thus, conducting further research on the narratives of these women, can lead to necessary improvements and more equitable opportunities.

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## حتی «زن شگفت‌انگیز» هم نمی‌توانست هر کاری را انجام دهد؛ تأثیرات سندروم «زن شگفت‌انگیز» بر زنان با شریک زندانی

دانشجوی دکتری، دانشکده روانشناسی و مشاوره، دانشگاه ایالتی گاوررز، ایلینوی، ایالات متحده آمریکا  
استادیار، دانشکده روانشناسی و مشاوره، نیویورک، ایلینوی، ایالات متحده آمریکا  
دانشکده روانشناسی و مشاوره، دانشگاه کلمبیا، نیویورک، ایالات متحده آمریکا

الکسیس گریگوراش<sup>id</sup>  
امان تادروس\*<sup>id</sup>  
انها ژورمالانی<sup>id</sup>

emantadros@gmail.com

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چکیده

پدیده زندانی شدن تقریباً ۲ میلیون نفر در آمریکا را تحت تأثیر قرار می‌دهد که حدود نیمی از جمعیت مردان زندانی گزارش می‌دهند که در یک رابطه صمیمی هستند. این باعث می‌شود شرکای غیر زندانی استرس‌ها و چالش‌های مختلفی را تجربه کنند. به طور ویژه در مورد زنان، پدیده‌ای به نام «سندرم زن شگفت‌انگیز» وجود دارد که به نقش‌های مختلفی از جمله مراقب، شریک زندگی، زن شغلی و نان‌آوری اشاره دارد که می‌تواند منجر به میزان بالاتر استرس و نارضایتی، کاهش عملکرد خانواده و الگوهای ناکارآمد شود. این می‌تواند احساس ناخرسندی، نارضایتی و طغیان را تشدید کند و به احساسات منفی نسبت به خانواده تبدیل شود؛ حبس شریک زندگی می‌تواند این تأثیرات را تشدید کند و منجر به نرخ بالاتر استرس و سایر مشکلات مرتبط با سلامت روان شود. هدف این پژوهش پرداختن به خلأهای موجود در ادبیات مربوط به نیازهای اجتماعی، عاطفی، مالی و سیستمی زنان با شرکای زندانی، از طریق حمایت از تغییرات سیاستی بود. علاوه بر این، کاوش و تحقیق تجربی در مورد این جمعیت می‌تواند به کاهش برخی از اثرات منفی کمک کند و نتایج بهتری برای زنان و خانواده‌های آنها ایجاد کند.

**کلیدواژه‌ها:** حبس، سندرم ابرزن، نژاد، سلامت روان، زنان