

# PRISON MASCULINITIES

## International Perspectives and Interpretations

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### THE TOLL OF TOTALISING MASCULINITIES IN PRISON

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## THE TOLL OF TOTALISING MASCULINITIES IN PRISON

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### Introduction

Unless specified, when imagining and talking about prison, ordinarily we picture men. Prison's manliness is much more than a mere confirmation of the biological (sex) composition of its predominant population, but a reflection of its culture and policies (see Carrabine & Longhurst, 1998).<sup>1</sup> Designed for men, mostly housing men, and largely managed by men, our androcentric prisons nonetheless never embody a single uniform, "hegemonic" notion of manliness. Academic analysis has long moved away from a simplistic preoccupation with "hyper/ultramascularity" of men's prisons, recognising now the diversity, fluidity, temporality, and contextuality of masculine ideologies and masculine identities and performances inside prisons housing men.

In Weberian "ideal types" terms, for analytical purposes, scholars distinguish hegemonic, dominant, and subordinate masculinities,<sup>2</sup> although these inevitably cross-pollinate into what some have called "hybrid" masculinities (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; see Demetriou, 2001). This is especially true in globalised, diverse, porous, and complex postmodern societies (see Young, 1999). However, these academic analyses tend to draw almost exclusively on the data from the global North and Western episteme, with a strong Anglophone bias. We might benefit from a closer look into prisons beyond the putative global North by examining the role and processes of masculinities in sustaining prison order and the individual agential work of men in non-Western prisons.<sup>3</sup> Drawing on semi-ethnographic research in a Ukrainian medium-security prison for men, I analyse the role of patriarchy in configuring social relations in a non-Western men's prison and in the subjective interpretation of masculine ideals by the incarcerated men. In doing so, whilst lending support to findings from the West that question many traditional tropes about inherent and rampant hypermasculine violence in men's prisons, I caution against heralding the

universal dawn of more accepting, femininity-accommodating prison masculinities. I describe how prison masculinities adjust along with changing prison practices and penal opportunities, giving rise to the co-existence of several hegemonic prisoner masculinities, yet preserve their traditional misogynistic properties and homophobic attitudes, and rely on fundamental mechanisms of patriarchy: masculine policing, censure, and stratification.

## The diversity of masculinities

In a broad sense, masculinities refer to cultural ideas about being a man and ways of enacting and embodying these ideals, including different conceptions of the self. Reflecting power inequality in gender relations, various masculinities form a hierarchy. Whereas men with real economic and political power may embody dominant masculinities, hegemonic masculinities represent an essentialised cultural ideal with wide popular appeal to which a majority of boys and men aspire and which many women may regard as a gold standard of manliness (Beasley, 2008; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Demetriou, 2001). Primed to legitimise patriarchy, which is men's political, economic, and cultural domination as a social group, masculinities' basic denominator is men's fear of feminisation: being perceived as not manly "enough". Exclusion through othering, such as juxtaposing men against women (or rather complementary "opposites" of feminine and masculine) and between different masculinities, lies at the heart of gender relations and the reproduction of patriarchy.

As earlier, *a fortiori* Western, researchers rarely came from the populations they studied, their conceptualisations of working-class and underclass masculinities tended to be, perhaps unsurprisingly, quite static and conservative (Morris & Morris, 1963; Sykes, 1958; Willis, 1977). Together, and sometimes equated, with (variably) "toxic", "hyper", but often just "hegemonic" masculinities, these masculinities are associated with (frequently essentialised) aggressiveness, sexism, homophobia, disinterest in engaged fatherhood and sustainable, monogamic, and equitable heterosexual relationships, selective emotional frigidity, anti-"domestication", and other men's "deficits" and "problematic character traits". However, constantly changing structural opportunities, including labour market reconfiguration, along with globalisation and the media-intensified virality of new cultural models and virtues, continuously hybridise ideas of what "modern" men ought to be and where the boundaries of manliness and femininity lie (Eisen & Yamashita, 2019; Elliott, 2016; Roberts, 2012; also Young, 1999). In response, media and academic accounts regularly proclaim various masculinity "crises" or, conversely, the emergence of new-era masculinities. What we witness is, arguably, mere metamorphoses of cultural values, normative body imagery, or behavioural performances pertaining to different types of masculinities: dominant, hegemonic, subaltern, and so forth. Nonetheless, several scholars have warned that more "open", egalitarian, femininity-accepting and appropriating, "hybrid" masculinities effectively serve to essentialise gender and mask structural gender inequality, thus re-legitimising and perpetuating patriarchy

(Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Demetriou, 2001; Harrington, 2022). Whilst not denying that some masculinities may indeed be a step away from misogynistic and homophobic orthodoxy, the transformation only highlights the inherent property of masculinities: their internal contradictions, perpetual dynamics and contingencies, as well as their susceptibility to contestation and disruption. As long as these masculinities survive, adapt, and transform, patriarchy endures.

## Prisons as gendered places

One of many prison paradoxes is that they are disempowering and, if we are talking about men's prisons, emasculating.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, men's prisons are often seen as "ultramasculine", whereby many hegemonic masculine values and attitudes, behavioural clichés, corporeal ideals, and personal identities are less nuanced and generally pushed to the extreme. The result is elevated violence and the excessive exploitation of those down the hierarchical ladder.<sup>5</sup>

Albeit acknowledging the limits of calculated human rationality, much of the recent masculinity literature examines prisoner masculinities through the logic of self-interest. For example, Ricciardelli et al. (2015) convincingly depict how men consciously modify their conduct to minimise penal risks and ameliorate their vulnerabilities in unpredictable, taxing, and dangerous prison environments. Ironically, through their gendered risk management strategies, prisoners reproduce penal risks, perpetuating insecurity and vulnerability, and ultimately masculine standards of domination. In fact, the deprivation school of (men's) prisoner cultures views masculine cultures and hierarchies as the means for co-existence and survival in otherwise volatile, dangerous, and eviscerating conditions (Lindegaard & Gear, 2014; Sykes, 1958; Trammell, 2012). Coston and Kimmel (2012) posit that marginalised men, for example prisoners, effectively face an existential choice: to overconform to the hegemonic ideal and thus lay claim to male privilege (Connell's patriarchal dividend) or reject the cultural masculine ideal by adopting alternative, subaltern (marginalised) masculinities. This choice is a prime example of the mutual constitution of human agency and social structure, whereby men draw on cultures to construct their identities, give meaning to their daily lives, and enact public presentations of self. By doing this, they legitimise, reproduce, contest, and alter these cultures (including discourses).<sup>6</sup>

Western academia is burgeoning with accounts of men strategically adjusting their masculine performances to survive imprisonment and hasten their release. Apart from conventional "tough fronting", adjustment may entail moving from a stereotypical hegemonic masculinity to a more docile, "feminine" masculinity enabling passage to and stability in lower security regimes. The strategy may also secure parole by choosing not to follow traditional masculine expectations, such as harassment of prisoners convicted of sex offences. Such vulnerability-containing prudence may even confer masculine status and prestige (Ricciardelli et al., 2015; also Crewe, 2009; Maguire, 2021). Conversely, in jurisdictions where prisoner movements to less secure regimes are unlikely, hegemonic prisoner masculinities

tend to valorise antagonism *vis-à-vis* staff and institutionalise severe othering of subordinate masculinities along with intense masculine surveillance and policing (Lindegaard & Gear, 2014; Sabo et al., 2001; although see, e.g., O'Donnell, 2019). As a result, in each prison, and often in different units within one prison, for example, protective or disciplinary segregation units, gendered social relations reflect and create specific masculine cultures where different masculine identities are promoted or, conversely, censured.

The broadening recognition of the diversity of masculine performances and identities in men's prisons often clashes with archetypal tropes of "toxic" masculinity habitually attributed to the racialised minorities who form the bulwark of the prison populations in many Western countries.<sup>7</sup> Thus, in prison, as in wider communities, as masculine ideals are contingent on structural arrangements and normative performances as well as on subjectivities and the individual needs of men *in situ*, they constantly clash. In what follows, I discuss how such clashes produce specific configurations of power relations and subjective positions among men in a Ukrainian prison.

## A methodological note

This discussion draws on five months of semi-ethnographic research in a medium-security prison for men, housing about 800 prisoners, mostly recidivists, from Kyiv and the Kyiv region of Ukraine. As other Ukrainian prisons, this prison was grossly understaffed, with about 20–30 uniformed officers present (see Symkovych, 2018a). My prolonged, daily presence allowed me to establish a degree of trust and the opportunity to convey back and discuss emerging findings with my research participants. The data comprised hundreds of hours of conversations, observations, and semi-structured interviews with prisoners, prison officers, and senior commanders (managers). The research participants, selected through snowball and purposive sampling, included prisoners from all tiers of the informal hierarchy, discussed below, as well as officers from all divisions, with different reputations, personal histories, and orientations (for more on the methodology see Symkovych, 2017, 2018b, 2018c, 2019). I ground the project in social constructionism, thematically analysing the data after coding them for understanding and expressions of masculinities. Being a case study, no representative claims are possible.<sup>8</sup> Rather, my study serves as an entrée into the construction and reproduction of masculine identities and prison social order in a region that Western academia hitherto largely overlooked.

## Ukraine and its prisoner underworld

Ukraine's prison population has been decreasing since the country's independence in 1991. Between 2000 and 2020, the prison population rate dropped from 443 to 144 prisoners per 100,000 general population (Institute for Crime and Justice Policy Research, 2021).<sup>9</sup> Men constitute about 95.6% of its 51,248 prisoners.<sup>10</sup>

Typical of the post-Soviet region, Ukrainian prisons have long been severely underfunded, and are infamous for dilapidated facilities, inadequate health care, and many other violations of basic human rights and human dignity. As in many other non-Western jurisdictions with limited state involvement in the surveillance and operational running of their understaffed and materially eviscerated prisons, much of the social order in Ukrainian prisons stems from the informal prisoner organisation and its strict code of conduct (see, e.g., Birkbeck, 2011; Fischer-Hoffman, 2022; Nunes Dias & Salla, 2017; O'Donnell, 2019).

Unlike with gangs elsewhere, membership of the Ukrainian prisoner underworld is universal and inescapable. Following an initial probing during their first time on remand (*propýska*), all male prisoners are assigned to one of four main strata based on their perceived manliness. Prisoners must prove their manhood by not being effeminate or guilty of “unmanly” crimes or conduct. With the constant threat of downgrading, prisoners must maintain their masculine status by enduring the toils of imprisonment with emotional and physical stoicism, while carefully balancing between official penal power and the demands of the informal rules. Elsewhere I describe how this system of informal governance strikingly curbed violence by institutionalising conflict resolution mechanisms and strictly regimenting prisoner behaviour. As prisoner self-organisation maximised predictability and assured relative peace, it enjoyed a degree of empirical legitimacy. Additionally, the formal administration relied on it to maintain a semblance of orderliness and control (see Symkovich, 2018a, 2018c, 2018d). The underworld structure operated through rigid stratification, intense surveillance, censure of subordinate masculinities, and harsh punishment for transgressing the informal rules. As Weyrauch (1971) observes, groups of interdependent people generate rules to govern both the common life and relationships with “outsiders”. These informal rules, or rather a set of informal principles, policies, and mores, known as *ponyáttya*, ensured durable order and relative peace. The accepted principles included a requirement to justify personal words and deeds, prohibition of informing on, or stealing from, other prisoners, respect for mothers (but not women in general), and adherence to informal rules and hierarchy (see Symkovich, 2018c).

Prisoners policed each other's masculine performance round the clock, enabled by the barrack-style housing and lack of privacy, and because non-reporting of others' masculine “failures” was itself a punishable offence (Symkovich, 2017). Peace had its price. Several prisoners confided that the toll of peer surveillance and autocensorship was grave; some feared that even uttering something inadvertently in their sleep could ruin their life. The constant anxiety was understandable as stakes were enormous: failure to maintain the required “manliness” meant symbolic emasculation and, as a result, a subhuman life. Whereas “minor” informal transgressions entailed a beating ordered by an informal judge from the “criminal elite” (*blatni*), the upper echelon of the prisoner pecking order, a serious violation of masculine expectations and informal norms (*ponyáttya*) meant relegation to the bottom of this hierarchy. Becoming an “outcast” meant physical and symbolic exclusion from the male world of prisoners. The “outcasts” (*opúshcheni*) could not share food or

touch the belongings of the rest, their bunk beds in the barracks and their tables in the prison cafeteria were physically moved away from everyone. Other prisoners avoided association with “outcasts” so as not to “taint” their own reputation. To emphasise that such masculine “failure” effectively equated these men with women, they were often given derogatory feminine nicknames and subjected to misogynistic slurs. Some of them worked as prostitutes and performed other feminised, understood as “below the dignity of a man”, jobs in the *sub rosa* prison economy. These entailed cleaning toilets, washing other prisoners’ clothes, fetching things and passing messages, or being a lookout during gambling, drug use, or underworld meetings. Ostracised prisoners from the bottom of the prison hierarchy were at an elevated risk of being raped. In sum, the position of these emasculated prisoners served as a constant reminder to all other prisoners of the value of male privilege and the repercussions for not complying with the standards of hegemonic masculinity.

### **Contested masculine subjectivities and dynamic hegemonic masculinities**

No masculine culture can subsist without actual men. The prisoners *in situ* actively reproduced the masculine culture, rarely challenging the culture due to the described high risks and exorbitant costs associated with deviance. The culture in the prison supplied men with ideals and discourses to (re)construct their identities and give meaning to their daily lives. However, the changes in penal policies, prison practices, and prison population meant that masculine culture was in constant flux. I identified the co-existence of at least two, at times conflicting but often overlapping, versions of hegemonic prisoner masculinities, in addition to subordinate prisoner masculinities as well as the masculinities of prison officers.

The more traditional version of hegemonic masculinity prescribed a rhetoric of resistance and non-compliance with officialdom. This version upheld “traditional” masculine values, attitudes, and expectations, such as misogyny, homophobia, aversion to “weakness”, along with Sykesian (1958) dictates of not informing or collaborating in other manners with the authorities. Bolstering the idea of prisoner fraternity, opposition-to-officialdom hegemonic prisoner masculinity drew its legitimacy from the unfairness and corruption of the national criminal justice and judicial systems as well as from its long-institutionalised tradition and legacies and mythologies of the Soviet Gulag (Symkovych, 2018c, 2018d). While most prisoners subscribed to this version of masculinity, few managed to live up to it.

Other versions of masculinities had evidently become hegemonic, not least because of the costs associated with living the more orthodox version of hegemonic masculinity, such as constant harassment by the administration and delayed release. Whilst largely overlapping with the aforementioned traditional ideal, including its active censure of “outcasts” marginalised masculinity, this newer, hybrid hegemonic masculinity accommodated the *real politik* of prisoners. It prudently balanced between the formal and informal demands: between candid

opposition to the authorities and docile, overtly manifest compliance with the official regime. Steadfast opposition to and challenging formal power was no longer universally seen as a masculine ideal. Rather, for many, challenging formal authority now represented a quixotic struggle and juvenile romanticism at best or immature short-sightedness and lack of intelligence at worst (see Crewe, 2009). Getting out of prison had become more important, more “manly” than adhering uncritically to what many saw as outdated, impractical ideals of masculine honour (see Ricciardelli et al., 2015 on strategic masculinities).

On the one hand, these two hegemonic masculinities were competing. Prisoners questioned the masculinity of those who subscribed to the alternative version. Proponents of the more orthodox, oppositional masculinity claimed that by being compliant, even if superficially, prisoners revealed their “weakness” and “a loss of dignity and self-respect”, thus they were not masculine enough, almost becoming women (*báby*). Conversely, those embracing a more prudent version argued that those overtly opposed to the authorities lacked maturity and agency. As one prisoner said, “you are hardly a grown-up man when the state feeds you, dresses you, and tells you when to take shit”, regardless of how recalcitrant those prisoners were *vis-à-vis* the prison officers. According to proponents of this emerging version of hegemonic masculinity, delaying freedom and avoiding taking responsibility for post-prison life manifested weakness, not masculine maturity and honour. As cultural ideals, these two hegemonic masculinities prioritised different values of self-determination: the pride in claiming immediate “liberty”, albeit relative and superficial, from “dull compulsion” and submission to the authorities versus the strategic value of ultimate, “real” freedom.

On the other hand, these two versions gave the men in prison resources to find meaning in their daily lives and reconstruct their identities. For example, many subscribers to both versions of this local hegemonic masculinity sought opportunities to develop their identities as responsible men, not least to offset the stagnant, uneventful, and infantilising prison regime. Unlike in the West, the responsabilisation ethos of “new penology” is not prominent in the Ukrainian prison system. To progress through their sentences, Ukrainian prisoners in general must follow basic regime rules and not join the “criminal elite” ranks, they have no need to constantly present a new, “rehabilitated” persona to the authorities (*cf.* Ballesteros-Pena, 2018; Crewe, 2009; Warr, 2020). Even so, many men in my study opted to set their own small, personal projects such as earning in the prison industry, building a cage for a hamster they reared in prison, or fighting various injustices through complaints. These projects were clearly outside any official pretence of rehabilitation (for more on the problems of rehabilitation in Ukraine see Symkovych, 2020c). Finding a meaningful occupation or duty had different motivations and surpassed any official and unofficial divisions.

Those in the “criminal elite” stratum provided informal justice and governance services; those in the “collaborators” stratum (*kozly*) worked as a vital conduit between the administration and prisoners, effectively ensuring prisoner requests were dealt in a timely manner and that prison industry operated smoothly (see



Symkovych, 2018a, 2018b). Even the “outcasts” of subordinate masculinities rightly claimed that without their contribution to the informal economy, conflicts would erupt (Symkovych, 2017). As active agents, prisoners subscribed to those versions (and sometimes selected different bits *à la carte*) of masculinities that served their tactical and strategic needs best. Enactment of any version posed numerous dilemmas and had its costs. As all men were structurally constrained in what type of masculinity they could embody and aspire to, they chose according to the resources at their disposal. While shifts were often from more oppositional and traditional to more pragmatic and accommodating hegemonic masculinity, some prisoners vacillated or moved in the opposite direction, especially after being subjected to arbitrary and unfair treatment by staff or disgruntled with life more generally. Losing or gaining hope was an important factor in these identity and ideology shifts. Masculinity offered a central purpose and meaning to the lives of these men. Masculinity remains among the few available resources for these largely disempowered men who exist under the heavy weight of penal power and face bleak opportunities for the future. Tapping into the available masculine discourses, many men constructed aspirational masculinities, such as that of a breadwinner or an involved father – despite hitherto being mostly absent from the lives of their children (see Bartlett and Eriksson, 2019). Such agential work assisted prisoners in surviving incarceration by finding and sustaining hope and offsetting the infantilising and emasculating realities of prison life.

### **Misogyny, fraternity, and prison as a porous institution**

Rather than being a remote archipelago, prisons are embedded culturally and materially in wider societies. Apart from the cultural legacies shaping prison power relations, men – policymakers as well as prisoners and staff – impose onto the prison masculine ideologies and behavioural models that are prevalent in the community-at-large (the export from prison into wider society is as prominent). Most men in the prison, prisoners and officers alike, regardless of their formal or informal status or what type of masculinity they embodied, shared many ideals, behavioural dictates, and above all, heterosexism. An anti-gay discourse, along with approval and participation in the subjugation and dehumanisation of “outcasts”, often dressed in misogynistic terms, was universal among prisoners and officers alike. Revisiting Gramsci, Yang (2020) reminds us that the hegemonic part of hegemonic masculinity means that it works not only through tacit acquiesce (as it is not merely a cultural ideal), but also through men’s conscious participation in the subordination of other masculinities, including within institutions such as the prison, complicit and engaged in the production and hierarchised ordering of masculinities. Anti-women attitudes were commonplace. For example, many prisoners preferred to blame women for their predicament, abdicating responsibility for the actions that lead to their imprisonment. A classic misogynistic binary division of homogenised women into saint and devil-like types shaped prisoner discourse. Mothers who often proved to be the only family members still supporting their imprisoned sons

were venerated. Other women, conversely, were deemed a commodity. Women who dated and married imprisoned men (*zabchnytsi*), were cynically seen as a source of food parcels, outside communication, and occasional sex.<sup>11</sup>

The prison officers, who also mostly came from quite disadvantaged backgrounds, largely shared the masculine prison culture, espousing the same, or very similar, values and linguistic tropes as those of prisoners. When queried about their views on potentially allowing women to work inside men's prisons, the officers, with few exceptions, opposed the idea. Identically to the prisoners, as reasons, the officers named concerns for women officers' safety, their dignity ("opening up a dormitory in the morning with 50 men in underwear and stiff air"), and ability to physically restrain recalcitrant prisoners (see also Crewe, 2006). As a gendered, militarised organisation, the prison required two male officers to escort a woman visitor, including a volunteer worker, an inspector or industry contractor, inside the secure perimeter. Like the prisoners, the officers regarded women as either weak and incapable creatures deserving protection, or, conversely, as sexually unruly, and thus dangerous beasts. Citing semi-mythical scenarios from other fields or the media about women seducing, or rather being incapable of withstanding seduction by wicked and cunning male prisoners, these male officers saw women officers as a potential threat to prison order. Those few not *a priori* opposing mixed personnel still framed women as sly manipulators, whose soft power could be applied to strengthen order and control the prisoners. The one officer who said "why not?", argued that not all women are physically weak, and those with muscular bodies and enough physical strength could be allowed. Importantly, this question alarmed many of my research participants, some rolled their eyes and cynically remarked that that was yet another imposition of the West to "ruin Ukraine" and its "traditional values" (see also Symkovych, 2019). In other words, misogyny coalesced with nationalistic isolationism, anti-Western and conservative, illiberal attitudes, to justify the opposition to the idea of gender equality and women's capabilities.

These misogynistic attitudes also reflected how the prisoners wished to portray themselves as dangerous, physically strong, and unpredictable – the traits that some deemed "masculine". However, most prisoners in the research prison lacked these traits. Drug use before and when in prison and the degree of predictability that the prisoner underworld structure and its "inmate code" established, reduced the importance of violence and thus muscularity.<sup>12</sup> Unlike elsewhere, the men in the research prison rarely exercised, the vast majority did not look particularly healthy, and many appeared much older than their age (*cf.* Baumer & Meek, 2018; Norman, 2017).<sup>13</sup> The prison felt quite safe, and reported violence, corroborated by all research participants, was low. This was despite violence always being readily available, particularly as informal punishment for violating the "inmate code", or as a result of intoxication or sheer frustration. In line with other prison studies, many of my research participants felt emasculated by this lack of straightforward danger and direct confrontation (see, e.g., Jewkes, 2005; Maguire, 2021; Sparks et al., 1996). The officers and prisoners alike generally sneered at those, always young, prisoners and officers who tried to present a tough front and foreground their

physical strength. Many prisoners in my study struggled to reconcile their self-image, or rather their desired self-image, with the structural realities of infantilisation and domesticity in the penal regime. The uneventfulness, repetitiveness, lack of resources, boredom, and the utter frustration of daily prison life were hardly stereotypically manly. Similarly, prisoners regularly reminded the officers that their job had nothing to do with fighting crime and that, rather than being tough, these officers were docile objects of the prison commander's hectoring – and working for a very average salary (see Symkovych, 2018a, 2018b). As ideals and expectations were not always congruent with the realities, interrogation of self-worth and that of others was commonplace.

Although self-doubt and self-deprecation were universal, even if veiled by the veneer of confidence and pride, the men actively drew on relevant ideals and tapped into suitable cultural discourses to justify for themselves and for others their choices and behaviour. This built comfortable self-concepts, whilst contesting, always in gendered terms, those of other men. Contesting others' manliness was a daily practice in the prison. Prisoners not only challenged each other's manhood, but they also questioned the manliness of officers, who did the same (see Symkovych, 2018b). As a relational phenomenon (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), only being recognised as a man by others confirmed their masculine status, albeit, as I demonstrate, always tenuously and subject to revocation.

Even if patriarchal censure and stratification were at the heart of social relations in the prison, masculine solidarity was just as prominent. Whilst self-interest, albeit often aimed at mere survival and self-preservation, was an important, if not determining principle of prison life, its opposite, selflessness, was also at play. Masculine solidarity, fraternal care, and support were epitomised in the informal institution of a mutual-aid fund (*obshchák*) to which most prisoners donated cigarettes, food, and clothing items from the food parcels they received from outside. These items were then redistributed by the "criminal elite" to those in need, primarily, to prisoners without outside support or those in segregation. Despite the extreme care with which prisoners viewed and dealt with other prisoners (and of course staff), masculine fraternity was not an elusive ideal but a vital reality. Most prisoners had friends, although every single interviewee applied various caveats to the term, which is not at all surprising in an environment of low trust (Crewe, 2009; Liebling, 2004). The emotional investment in these close circles of friends, called *seményniki*,<sup>14</sup> was noticeable. My research participants fondly talked about time together with their *seményniki*, even if this mostly constituted drinking traditional, strong prison tea, *chífir*, from a single cup, and talking about daily life and the future (see O'Donnell, 2019 on *mequres*). Although all prisoners with whom I spoke stated that they could not trust anyone in prison, *seményniki* was the closest they could get to "normality", by which they meant life in a less distrustful, regimented, and surveillant space, where an innocent word or act would not obliterate their manliness and with it ruin their life. The very drinking from the same cup in the rigidly segregated prisoner world signified a degree of trust, masculine recognition, and acceptance – clearly something these men lacked, craved, and could to a

degree enjoy in this form of homosociality (see Symkovych, 2018b on the significance of “tea ceremonies”).

Being housed together, the prisoners depended on others and had to circumvent their desires and behaviour so as not to jeopardise the interests and welfare of others. As in other jurisdictions, the Ukrainian prisoners developed their version of cohabitation etiquette (see Kaminski, 2004). Furthermore, the prisoners were clear that their individual behaviour may attract summary punishment for the entire squad by the administration, for example, if they were late for morning exercises or if their dormitory was not properly clean. None could afford to be culpable for this. However, some men saw their duty beyond merely avoiding causing harm to others. These men argued that prisoners should care for other prisoners, that there should be a sense of fraternity, mutual support, and concern, as summarised thus by a research participant (see Symkovych, 2018b):

You must not be [like] a passenger on a train when you are in prison. You should care for others: discuss the current situation, help out the lads in the “pit” [segregation unit] or at least ask how things are down there, or in the medical ward, don’t do anything that might infringe other prisoners’ well-being. – These days, all prisoners are interested in is getting out (many just to inject a drug), and they don’t give a fuck what’s happening to others.

Thus, whilst prison survival elevated self-interest, if not egoism, to almost a guiding principle, prison survival did not abandon altruism and sociality completely. Men tapped into the masculine ideals of brotherhood and employed camaraderie discourse as a way of maintaining their humanity and their identities as responsible and social citizens in this emasculating and dehumanising environment. In other words, the masculine ideals contributed to dehumanising these incarcerated men and simultaneously helped to restore a semblance of humanity and sociality. The masculine structure described, not only provided the men in my study with models to navigate penal risks, whilst also perpetuating these risks (Ricciardelli et al., 2015), but it also helped these men to shape, and sometimes reinvent, their identities. Masculinities supplied the ideals and discourses that helped these men to see themselves in the least psychologically painful way and to present themselves to the world as favourably as their constrained capabilities (masculine capital) allowed them. Nonetheless, manliness was not available for all and it always remained provisional: men had not only to prove it but maintain it afterwards as a perceived lack of manliness threatened a downgrade within the informal hierarchy, and thus, by extension, a deterioration of their quality of life in prison.

## Conclusion

My semi-ethnographic research evinces the mighty force of patriarchy that shaped the identities and hierarchical relations among men in a Ukrainian prison. I have described a formidable, tight, and totalising masculine prisoner structure that

shaped and regulated the very minute details of daily life of incarcerated men. The structure bolstered the masculine ideal to which those men had to aspire if they did not want to face severe consequences. On the ideological level, the prisoner underworld replicated patriarchy and reinforced the idea of prisoner solidarity by excluding and censuring those men who did not pass the masculine threshold. On a practical level, through masculine stratification, including subjugation and abuse of some prisoners, it generated a version of peace and stability, albeit at an unacceptable moral and human price.

The narratives and observations from this Ukrainian prison attest to the ambivalent effect, and diversity, of masculinities in men's prisons. Not only was the status of a "man" always provisional and subject to external validation, but the meaning of being a "man" was also unstable. My research found that the masculine ideal and the understanding of prisoner honour have been undergoing metamorphoses along with changes in Ukrainian society at large and the liberalisation of prison policies and practices. The value of masculine pride was paramount. However, its conception was open to competing interpretations. This openness led to the co-existence of two hegemonic masculinities, whereby the adherents of both insisted on the centrality of male dignity, responsibility, self-determination, and autonomy. However, how they interpreted – and enacted – it, the weight they put on immediate versus strategic temporalities, led them to question each other's manliness. My research adds to the body of literature that challenges the perception of men's prisons as inevitably violent places. I show that fraught with contradictions, the masculine ideals to which prisoners subscribed could sustain violence but also curb it; they simultaneously undermined trust whilst also legitimising a degree of sociality and intimacy. Whilst the tight, even Orwellian, prisoner society compelled uniformity and ascendancy, the dynamic multiplicity of men's gender-construction and performance was nuanced and often contested. Men in prison were simultaneously victims and perpetrators of patriarchy. Individuals did gender to maximise their own status whilst scrutinising and contesting each other's manliness. Simultaneously, the prisoner "society" in general reassessed and reinvented what a "real man" meant, engendering two co-existing local versions of hegemonic masculinity. In other words, whilst men's manliness was under constant threat, so was the cultural ideal of hegemonic masculinity. The ideal proved to be continuously evolving yet retained its fundamental features such as misogyny and censure of subordinate masculinities.

These ambivalences, contradictions, and the perpetual evolution of masculine ideals and normative expectations rendered prisoners' lives precarious, psychologically taxing, and physically dangerous. The biggest hazard for the men in the prison was relegation to the status of a woman. The imposed feminisation attests to the enduring power of patriarchy and the role of masculinities in legitimising and perpetuating it. Masculinity in this intersubjective moral world gave these imprisoned men a reassurance of their worth by degrading women and subjugating non-dominant masculinities. Using the case of a Ukrainian men's prison, I show the enormous toll of totalising masculinities. From the second a prisoner steps into

a cell in a Ukrainian remand prison, he must declare whether he is a man, and every second after that, he must convince everyone else he is still a man to avoid being treated as a subhuman. This demonstrates that changing, “softening” masculinities in some places is not a universal trend. As Ricciardelli et al. (2015) rightly point out, context is vital not only for configuration but also for theorisation about masculinities.

The scholarship on prison masculinities has more than one blind spot. Recognition of the existence of local, regional, and global masculinities, as well as acknowledgement of the complexity and co-existence of multiple masculinities in one place and at different conjunctures in individual men’s lives, has helped to move from a glib, if not caricatural, view of social relations and agential work in men’s prisons. However, we still tend to extrapolate knowledge from mostly Western jurisdictions onto the entire world. Global, regional, and local masculinities are in constant conversations. Empirical findings from diverse settings are bound to inform and enrich them by moving beyond a preoccupation with violence and such masculine dichotomies as victims-perpetrators. Masculinities constitute a collective and individual response in a particular environment. Masculinities are subjected to and shape power configurations. As I show, men can simultaneously benefit from patriarchy and bear a high cost because of it. Including data from beyond the West helps to recognise all the complexities and contradictions of men’s world(s). We can also see how the concept of masculinity in the analyses of order, social relations, and identity work in men’s prisons around the globe benefits from this wider perspective.

## Notes

- 1 The incarceration of women, historically using men’s imprisonment management as a blueprint, is gradually recognising the specific needs and struggles of women prisoners. Even so, women’s prisons tend to perpetuate patriarchal subjugation of women, through prisons’ institutionalised paternalism and gendered work and education opportunities among other things. Because of the chapter’s focus, prisons here refer to men’s prisons and prisoners imply incarcerated men, except where otherwise stated.
- 2 This is one of many power-based nomenclatures. Masculinities are manifold and thus can reflect specific social divisions: be it racial/ethnic, class, occupational, age, (mostly physical) (dis)ability, a degree of criminalisation and citizenship/settlement status, sexual orientations and parental statuses, political-ideological or religious allegiances and traditions, educational attainment, geographies, and so on.
- 3 By no means do I subscribe to the binary division of the global North (West) versus global South (“periphery”). I recognise the fluidity of these concepts and the existence of pockets of the global South in conventionally Western countries, especially in settler-colonial societies.
- 4 Women’s incarceration potentially constitutes even stronger gender policing and disempowerment (Bandyopadhyay, 2010; Bosworth, 1999; Crewe et al., 2017; Dirsuweit, 1999; Rowe, 2016). See endnote 1.
- 5 As local masculinities are in reciprocal conversations with regional masculinities, men’s prisons in more violent and unequal societies tend to be excessively violent and stratified

- compared with prisons in more egalitarian societies. Consider, for example, South Africa and the USA versus the Netherlands and Finland, although see O'Donnell (2019) on Ethiopia.
- 6 Obviously, women and feminisms also destabilise masculine cultures, including hegemonic masculinities (hence “hybrid” masculinities); conversely, women also play an important role in the legitimisation and reproduction of heteronormative patriarchy.
  - 7 These minority groups import masculine identities, values, and behavioural norms from their communities, thus adding to the local dynamics of renegotiated and hybridised in-prison masculinities (Irwin & Cressey, 1962; Mears et al., 2013; Phillips, 2012; Pyrooz et al., 2011).
  - 8 Even so, the prisoners shared their previous experiences from all sorts of penal institutions: young offenders' prisons, remand prisons, and maximum-security prisons, including death row, before it was abolished. Furthermore, living with officers from all over Ukraine during the fieldwork, I could discuss my findings with hundreds of officers working in all types of institutions and different roles and learn about their perspectives. This gave me some confidence that my findings were by no means unique to the research prison.
  - 9 See Symkovych (2018a, 2020a, 2020b) for more information on penal transformations and the prison population drop in Ukraine.
  - 10 Official capacity is 88,807 beds (Institute for Crime and Justice Policy Research, 2021).
  - 11 Officially married prisoners are entitled to regular family visits, each lasting 24–72 hours.
  - 12 Bodybuilding may constitute an important identity-building project aimed at regaining a semblance of control in the disempowering prison environment (Carrabine & Longhurst, 1998; Earle, 2018); manual/intellectual and physical/mental may become empowering and gendered dichotomies when conventional routes to success are blocked because of class inequalities (Willis, 1977).
  - 13 Additionally, prison food was not particularly appealing and complaints about healthcare were legion.
  - 14 This Russian neologism roughly translates as “of a family”.

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