

# Masculinity and Violence in Prisons - Corrections



CISST  
CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE PENAL SYSTEM

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TURKEY'S CENTER FOR PRISON STUDIES





# **Masculinity and Violence in Prisons - Corrections**

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# TABLE OF CONTENT

<u>1</u>	<u>Introduction</u> .....	7
<u>2</u>	<u>Construction of Masculinity</u> .....	9
<u>2.1</u>	<u>The construction of masculinity in prisons</u> .....	10
<u>3</u>	<u>Sexualized violence as an expression of male hegemony</u> .....	12
<u>4</u>	<u>Perspectives and possibilities to redefine masculinity</u> .....	15
<u>5</u>	<u>Conclusion</u> .....	17
	<u>Bibliography</u> .....	18



# I. INTRODUCTION

Talking especially about male violence in prisons is not random, when taking into account that 93% of the inmates are men. It seems that crime is gendered. Especially crimes connected to violence are mainly committed by men; 89% of homicides are male offenses and 98% of the murderers in the death row are male. (Karp 2010, p.64) But how are manhood and crime connected and why is that mainly related to the use of violence?

A great variety of different explanations and theories from sociologists, historians and biologists exist. A historical attempt explains the honor of men used to be related with his willingness to use violence until the industrialization. So the competition and hierarchy of manhood was homosocial, negotiated only amongst men, using violence to ensure the respect of his peers. (Meuser 2003, p.38) Cultural anthropologists could not proof any cultural relation from violence and manhood, but rather refer to the social function of men within the family and the community. In the latter violence might be used as a contextual tool for socially excluded men to regain participation. According to the theory of evolution as another controversial explanation, female time used to be more valuable, as women put more time and effort in the progeny which led to male concurrence and competition about the female ability to reproduce. (Boatca 2003, pp.59) Sociologists often refer to the sex-role-theory; according to which men and women simply grow into the role given by society. Taught by societal patterns, sports, media and role models what male behavior is, men are pressured to proof their manhood by using violence. (Connell 2009, p.2) In today's research a new dimension is introduced by the feminist studies which distinguish between the biological sex "male" and the social gender "masculine", focusing on the latter. While it refuses the biological explanations of social behavior, it aims to research the societal construction of masculinity and the effect on the use of violence instead. (Kaufmann 2001, p.142)

Therefore also the following paper is going to use the term masculinity in order to focus on the

social construction of it. It is going to outline the general meaning of masculinity shortly at first; then present the construction of masculinity in prisons and the mutual effect on the inmates. Also the mono-sexual circumstance shall be taken into account and how it leads to an exaggeration. Concluding it will try to point out alternatives to the violence-based hierarchy and how to replace the given understanding of masculinity.



## 2. CONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINITY

To explain the relation from masculinity and violence, a definition of what masculinity actually is needs to be made first. The characteristic of being masculine is no inborn attribute; but men are constantly asked to work on their masculine appearance. Therefore they will need to reinforce the societal acknowledged, typical masculine behavior which includes the desire for women and the avoidance of female characteristics, like showing emotions. (Robinson 2011, p.1332) The continuous process of hiding emotions might make men emotionally inexpressive and leads on one hand to emotional blunting and on the other hand to the reinforcement of silent stoicism – the silent endurance on experiencing pain. (Levit 2001, p.97)

According to Bourdieu masculinity is characterized by an ongoing competition. The competition is brought into play within various homogenous frameworks, like sports, politics, economy or the army, in which women are only supposed to be spectators. The resulting male hierarchy leads to a double construction of masculinity: Firstly it follows the logic of distinction, according to which men distance from women and weaker, less powerful men. Secondly, the logic of domination means the endeavor to dominate other men and use women as a symbolic instrument to express their power. This hierarchy is characterized by a competitive structure, in which violence is used to remain the social order and its exclusiveness. (Meuser 2003, pp.39)

But it is important always to see masculinity within its place in the gender structure and considering its interdependence of the gender relations. Masculinity is not a static fact, but an active construction permanently influenced by various factors: power structures, economic relations, culture, language, race and class. (Connell 2000, p.23)

## 2.1 The construction of masculinity in prisons

The construction of masculinity in prisons can be seen as an extreme version of the social order in civil society; therefore it is also called “Hypermasculinity”. The circumstances in prisons are affected by different factors. Besides the pre-existing prisoner characteristics, also structural factors as well as management practices need to be taken into account and are as important. (Hommel/Thompson 2005, p.2)

The prison as a “total institution” is a structural factor. This means on one hand, that all the inmates – regardless religion, race and social class - spend all aspects of their life at the same place and under the same authority, leading to a loss of individual personality and the blurring of the separation of societal status. Therefore all ordinary characteristics of masculinity and possibilities to mark the socio-economic status are lacking and are replaced by an alternative construction of masculinity which is based on a strict hierarchy of violence. On the other hand the prison poses the ultimate framework for male competition - within a sole homosocial society without female participants. (Karp 2010, p.66, Bereswill n.d., p.243) Regarding management practices within the institution it is important to mention, that violence is also caused by frustration, rejection and lacking acknowledgement which is not only reinforced by the other inmates, but mainly by the staff. (Meuser 2003, p.45) This environment reinforces a feeling of powerlessness by unfair and abusive treatment. As this poses a lack of the most important societal-implied masculine needs, the fulfillment of the men’s need of respect, it can lead to the urge to dominate others by violent and aggressive behavior. Especially because many prisoners come from a low-income background, they used to “pride themselves on their toughness in order to receive respect”. But even though the majority of the inmates do not come from a violent background and might be convicted for a non-violent crime, in prison they need to become violent in order to pretend they are tough and no victims. (Kupers 2005, pp.716)

In this violence based surrounding is no room for emotions. As above mentioned, showing emotions is considered as a female characteristic and therefore marks one as weak. But in prisons the “male code” suggests “not [to] display weakness of any kind, does not display emotions other than anger, does not depend on anyone, is never vulnerable, does not snitch, does not cooperate with the authorities, and suffers pain in silence” (Kupers 2005, p.718) There is just a narrow path between appearing aggressive in order to “behave male” but without losing control on your feelings and thereby to lose face. To keep the balance and the control, inmates put on an emotional mask to hide vulnerabilities and protect against aggression. While “masking” is needed to suppress unwanted feelings, the concept of “fronting” aims the contrary as thereby prisoners exaggerate their criminal and violent potential by evocating the needed emotions. (Crewe/War/Bennett/Smith 2013, pp.10) Because of the impossibility of showing emotions, also friendships are impossible. Talking to the wrong person about one’s vulnerability, can mean your death. Due to the overall mutual mistrust,

inmates distinguish between “frontstage” and “backstage” and adjust their behavior accordingly. While the former is rather similar to a performance, only in the backstage, where prisoners are unwatched on their own, they can let go of their emotional masks. But as a lack of privacy these areas are hard to maintain. (Crewe/War/Bennett/Smith 2013, pp. 3)

*“It’s just men, isn’t it, macho bullshit. It’s like Joe. Out there he’s a good bloke, family man, top geezer. In here he has to put on a little bit of front to save face. I know that, he knows that, people that know him know that. We all know. We obviously don’t verbally mention it. (Kyle)”*

*(Crewe/War/Bennet/Smith 2013, p.9)*

The missing opportunity to define one’s own status and the tabooing of weakness lead to a sensitive and instable societal order. One’s masculinity is repetitively questioned and therefore needs to be reconfirmed by defending any signs of weakness by a mutual exchange of violence and abuses. The resulting structure of trying “to remain male” and the permanent fear of failing and to end up at the bottom of the society – which means to become the victim of suppression and violence - culminates in a vicious circle of exaggerated male stereotypes and violence. (Bereswill n.d., pp.244, Bereswill 2008, pp.2554)

While in civil society men define their masculine behavior by differentiating mainly from women (see chapter 2), in the mainly unisex prisons this possibility is lacking. As hypermasculinity is also characterized by the domination of women and the stigmatization of homosexuality, it becomes clear, which status men with female characteristics were assigned to. (Kupers 2005, p.716) In the unofficial but well-known prison code the bottom of the hierarchy is defined by feminine characteristics while behavior according to the rules of hypermasculinity is considered as the key to survive and to dominate the hierarchy. (Kupers 2001, p.115) Because of the societal importance of the female role and in order to remain the category of men, inferior men are listed and treated like women. (Smaus 2003, p.110)

### 3. SEXUALIZED VIOLENCE AS AN EXPRESSION OF MALE HEGEMONY

Combining the vicious circle of violence with hypermasculinity and the common use of female characteristics in order to describe the bottom of hierarchy, it often results in the use of sexual violence; in which rape poses the most extreme form. In prison, rape is not considered as any sexual, but only as a pure act of violence to remain the social order. (Smaus 2003, p.106)

It is important to understand men-to-men rape in prisons as a sole masculine tool to exercise violence in order to assign the roles of victim and perpetrator. Due to the lack of any sexual emotions, attributions like homo- or heterosexuality are inadequate. Compared to civil society, characteristics like “economical, cultural, social and symbolic capital” to establish a power hierarchy are missing in prison, so rape is a tool to replace these status symbols: hegemony is established by the distinction of who penetrates and who got penetrated. (Smaus 2003, pp.107) The main argument by prisoners why penetrative sex is considered as a normal heterosexual act is, that the difference between “entering a vagina or a female anus and a male anus is not significant (...). A wide gulf, they insist, exists between such behavior and becoming passive, taking someone inside their own body, providing pleasure and orgasm to someone else’s penis instead of their own.” (Donaldson 2001, p.125) Following this argument the perpetrator has proved his masculinities and his power within the institutional setting of powerlessness and therefore defended his position at the top of the hierarchy, while for the victim rape results in a binding subservience. (Meuser 2003, pp.44) Therefore rape defines a clear border between leaders and victims; the separation is according to the characteristics of being dominant and strong or passive and weak. This border poses a permanent hierarchy – without having any chance change one’s position later on.

*“I, the dominant man, have the right to and the power to use you,  
the loser, sexually, as if you were a woman and my slave.”*

*(Kupers 2001, p.115)*

Once a man got raped, he is considered to lose his manhood and his identity. As feminine characteristics are used to describe the bottom of the hierarchy, rape victims are referred to as women, as they pose the lowest level in prison society. But this is not only true for the sexual aspect, but also they will be completely converted into women by their inmates. (Smaus 2003, pp.108) So the prison phrase “to make a woman out of you” literally means that one will get raped. (Messerschmidt 2001, p.67) The victim is forced to take over stereotyped female characteristics and jobs, for example doing the rapists laundry or cleaning work. But due to the rape the victim is seen as the property of the rapist; so he is not only considered to be his wife, but rather equal with a whore or a slave. Additionally to the loss of one’s own masculinity, rape also means the final break with one’s previous identity. As the entrance into prison as a total institution already means the impossibility of self-presentation, the last remaining chance for autonomy is one’s physical self-determination. Therefore rape as the penetration of the body and privacy poses the very last deprivation of liberty - and the ultimate exercise of power. It forces the victim to accept his new identity as woman and slave and to give up on one’s former self. (Smaus 2003, pp.110)

To really understand the hierarchy in prisons, the classification system need to be considered. The superior one’s which are defined by the “successful and continuing refusal to be penetrated”, are called wolves, daddies, jokers or simply men. (Robinson 2011, p.1350) The remaining inmates are mainly separated into two groups: the queens and the punks. The queens are completely referred to as females. Because of their willingness to adapt feminine traits and remain sexual passive, they are highly desired by the jokers. As this group mainly consists of jailed street transvestites, they accepted their role as an effeminate homosexual, but maximum make up 1-2% of the prisoners. Even though they do receive comparatively great respect by the inmates on one hand, on the other hand they are often victimized by homophobic staff and are denied privileges others might have. At the very bottom of the hierarchy are the punks. While the queens still consent to the sex – considering the circumstances, the punk’s status is characterized by rape. They are treated like slaves; are sold, traded and rented by their “daddy” to other men. Mostly punks are young, small, white and unexperienced; they come from middleclass families and are arrested for non-violent crimes. Despite the fact, that both groups pose the victims in prison society, the relation between queens and punks is tensed. Even though both suffer from men and keepers, queens see punks as weak as they do not accept their role, while punks blame the queens for their feminine characteristics as they refuse to do so. (Donaldson 2001, pp.119)

As rape leads to the control of the joker over the punk, it can result in a long-term relationship. The punk becomes the joker's property or slave and in exchange he is protected by his "boss" from violence or rape by other prisoners for a certain period of time. Even though the relationship is characterized by ongoing rape and humiliation by the joker, it secures the punk's safety and therefore can create a "total dependence on his Daddy for protection and social interaction" (Donaldson 2001, p.121). These prison relations are also called "marriages".

*"He would invite his buddies (Whites and Puerto Ricans) to his cell  
where I would be forced to sit on his lap with his dick up my ass.  
Then he would masturbate me while his friends would take turns raping my mouth."*

*(Anonymous 2001, p. 129)*

The quote of a former black punk does not only show the extent of sexualized violence in prisons, but it also gives a hint about the meaning of the social and ethnic background. But despite the given example, this case does not represent the reality most of the time. On the contrary - the classes of victim and perpetrators in prison might be understood as a compensation of the class structure in civil society. While the perpetrators come from lower classes, the victims are mostly white and belong to middle-class. But as in prison the only resource of power is violence, the perpetrators pose the powerful upper class. Especially rape is a tool to take revenge for the suppression in freedom; therefore 56% of the rapes are committed by black on white prisoners as this brings most recognition by the inmates. (Smaus 2003, pp. 113)

Even though male rape in prisons seems to be only a marginal phenomenon, it is a widespread practice – affecting one out of five prisoners (Messerschmidt 2001, p.67) - not only to clarify a prisoner's status within the prison hierarchy, but also it is used as an initiation rite to introduce into the intrasex power hierarchy as the most extreme form of masculinity. (Smaus 2003, p.117)

## 4. PERSPECTIVES AND POSSIBILITIES TO REDEFINE MASCULINITY

Aiming to break through the vicious circle of violence, based on the construction of masculinity which, in turn, is based on violence, one needs to focus on trying to implement a new construction and understanding of masculinity. When violence is caused by frustration, fear of failure and the lack of acknowledgement and therefore is supposed to fix a fragile male identity, new possibilities for prisoners to prove their manhood need to be created. (Meuser 2003, p.47) Also the fear of ending up at the bottom of the social ladder, the mistrust in the capacity of prisons to protect the victims and therefore the role of the prison management need to be taken into account.

As above mentioned there are various factors affecting the construction of masculinity. To reduce the prisoners' frustration as a result of lacking respect a fair treatment of the prison staff and management needs to be guaranteed. This is already starting with the litigation. When men receive a fair and justice litigation, they are more likely to accept the sentence and serve their imprisonment peacefully; while an unfair litigation reinforces a feeling of disrespect and therefore poses already the cornerstone of aggression. (Specter/Kupers 2001, p.244) A first step in prison may be the assignment of responsibility on the prisoner, e.g. the control over the cell's light, on one hand; and thereby the increase of his self-determination on the other hand. (Hommel/Thompson 2005, pp.3) To refer to the prisoners according to the occasion – e.g. as students and workers, not only as useless prisoner – and thereby as individuals, using their names not numbers, may open up a way for self-awareness and support the rebuilding of an identity up on a personality not only on their level of masculinity. In order to reduce the power hierarchy even the staff members may be called with their first names instead of 'gov' or 'miss' (Crewe/War/Bennet/Smith 2013, p.16)

Besides these environmental factors, another approach might be to make prisoners involve in a project in order to participate in achieving a common goal. (Hommel/Thompson 2005, pp.3) It is reported successfully from cooking or pottery classes, in which inmates worked together in order to

create something appreciable. They complemented each other on their effort and products without any shame of showing emotions. Also education classes serve a similar purpose as they pose a release of the daily prison life. Another way to enable prisoners to open up for emotions is by providing room for privacy. While the prison code asks men to mask and remain emotionally silent, private zones where prisoners are temporarily able to release pressure and express a broader emotional register than only an intimidating appearance in order to hinder emotional blunting are recommended. This is also true for the visit room. Here prisoners allow themselves to show emotions which they normally hide, as in this context the display of joy and affection is generally accepted. (Crewe/War/Bennet/Smith 2013, pp.14)

As hypermasculinity is not only a result of the social structure in the prison but also of the personal psychology of the prisoners themselves, besides the social-therapeutic attempts psychotherapists and counsellors should accompany the imprisonment as well. As stated above, most of the prisoners come from a low-income background in which a masculine appearance is already the only way to gain respect and emotions are considered as weakness, which reinforces the general resistance against psychological therapists. This poses a major problem for the prisoners, as showing emotions and vulnerabilities – needed preconditions for successful counselling – to the wrong person could mean death. Therefore it is important to create safe places and a trustful relation to enable men to open up. To achieve that, the clinician should respect the prisoner's reasons for the resistance and his situation; the contact partner needs to be frank and realistic about possible successes and advocate for the prisoner in order to establish trust. (Kupers 2005, pp.719)

To point out the clear interdependence from violence and masculinity and thereby the possibility to reduce violence by changing the construction of hypermasculinity, the K6G unit of the Los Angeles jail need to be mentioned. The unit is solely for transgender and gay men. Instead of posturing, violence and emotional suppression, one can find creativity, solidarity and friendship here. But the sexual orientation cannot be taken as the cause for the very different atmosphere in this unit, it is rather that "they do not fear being victimized or violently punished by other prisoners for being themselves". (Dolovich 2013, p.971) The inmates of the K6G unit do not need to compete about the lead of a male hegemony by a masculine appearance as many consider themselves as female or clearly violate the male prison code by being homosexual anyway. Therefore the atmosphere is less tensed and violent because of a general acceptance of female attributions – so there is "no premium on seeming hard or tough, on being stoic, on suppressing one's feelings". (Dolovich 2013, p.1014)



## 5. CONCLUSION

The circumstances manhood is exposed to in prisons, lead to an exaggeration of the construction of masculinity which can be found in civil society. The latter is influenced by historical and societal factors while also a various number of theories exist where the peoples understanding of how men need to be actually comes from. While it seems that men are generally in competition in order to reach the top the male hierarchy, in prisons there are no options available to achieve status – except of violence, which is considered as the ultimate characteristics of masculinity.

Taking into account the immense number of violent assaults and rape amongst inmates, it is time for a bottom-up change. As violence in prisons is mainly caused by a combination of frustration and self-defense, the reasons for even this effect poses the starting point for an intervention. The origin can be found in the construction of masculinity leading to the permanent struggle against indicating vulnerability in order to proof ones manhood. Therefore new ways to achieve status and respect in the prison hierarchy besides violence need to be introduced. This can be achieved on one hand by educational and occupational courses, on the other hand by opening up ways to access and allow emotions by therapists or counsellors, but also private zones.

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