





ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

How (In)Visibility Shapes Women's Experience of Inequity in Prison Work: A Cooperative Inquiry With Women Working in Australian Men's Prisons

Claudia Walker¹  | Sarah Riley¹  | Christine Stephens¹  | Alice Beban² 

¹School of Psychology, Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand | ²School of People, Environment and Planning, Massey University, Albany, New Zealand

Correspondence: Claudia Walker (walkerclaudiarose@gmail.com)

Received: 15 November 2024 | **Revised:** 29 July 2025 | **Accepted:** 29 September 2025

Keywords: cooperative inquiry | (in)visibility vortex | prison | visibility | women

ABSTRACT

Research shows that women working in men's prisons face both scrutiny and exclusion within a high-risk, masculinized occupational culture. Addressing a gap in theorizing the processes involved, this article explores the interplay of gender, visibility, and power through a poststructuralist-informed thematic analysis of data from 16 women participating in four cooperative inquiry groups in Australian men's prisons. Theorized through Lewis and Simpson's (in)visibility vortex, we demonstrate how gendered norms function to marginalize women. First, sexualization produces "abject exposure," making women visible against the male norm, undermining their workplace legitimacy. Second, "disappearance" renders women invisible to the norm by positioning them as incapable and forms self-disappearance to protect oneself from exposure. Third, "revelation" occurs when women make gendered norms visible, which participants did through their existence as professionally competent prison workers and, at times, explicit challenges. Our analysis demonstrates the importance of (in)visibility in maintaining gender inequities in male-dominated organizational cultures, such as prison work, and offers a complex theorization of how sexualization, risk and fear, and professional competence operate within the (in)visibility vortex. We also evidence how cooperative inquiry can develop collective strategies for resistance, offering insights for transforming the gendered conditions of such environments.

1 | Introduction

An extensive body of research documents women's struggle for acceptance into organizations (Acker 1990; Alvesson and Billing 2009; Heilman 2012), especially traditionally masculine workplaces such as male prisons. Prisons can be hostile workplaces for women, who may experience sexualization, exclusion, and disadvantage (Burdett et al. 2018; Kakuk 2020). Organizational research theorizes that relationships between visibility, invisibility, and organizational norms may maintain gendered inequity for women in male-dominated workplaces (Lewis and Simpson 2010, 2012). Yet, research with women working in men's prisons has not yet considered the

dynamics of (in)visibility, where women may experience themselves as both visible and invisible in relation to male norms.

The aims of this study are twofold: to understand how dynamics of invisibility and visibility shape organizational inequity for women working in men's prisons and to explore the strategies women develop to manage and resist these gendered inequities. Accordingly, we ask the following questions:

- How does the (in)visibility vortex enhance conceptual insight into practices producing gendered inequity for women working in men's prisons?

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- How can collective action research projects help women generate strategies that reveal and resist gendered (in)visibility and associated inequities within prison work?

To answer these questions, we explore how the dynamics of (in)visibility shape organizational inequity for women working in men's prisons. Building on Lewis and Simpson's (in)visibility vortex (2010, 2012), we examine (in)visibility through the three key components of the vortex: revelation, exposure, and disappearance. We show that for women in prison work, these (in)visibility processes are underpinned by dynamics of sexualization, risk and fear, and managing professional competence. Although each of these areas has been recognized as a gendered pressure in organizations (e.g., Fernando et al. 2019; Hatch-Maillette and Scalora 2002; Zajiji et al. 2020), they have not been sufficiently theorized together within existing (in)visibility literature. This gap is particularly profound in prison work research, despite the well-documented gender inequities and high-risk nature of the environment (Burdett et al. 2018; Kakuk 2020).

This article makes three key contributions. Theoretically, we demonstrate the relevance of the (in)visibility vortex in a new context and reconceptualize (in)visibility as a dynamic site of struggle shaped by sexualization, fear and risk, and managing professional competence—dimensions that have not previously been examined together. We argue that this reconceptualization makes the (in)visibility vortex a particularly useful framework for examining gendered power in prisons, but also in other masculinized, high-risk occupations, such as the military and police, where visibility remains under-theorized. Empirically, we contribute rare insights on (in)visibility within prison work, a site that is difficult for researchers to access and is under-represented in existing organizational studies. And, methodologically, we offer cooperative inquiry as a method for understanding how gendered power operates in organizational cultures and for producing collective strategies for resistance.

We begin an introductory review by outlining Lewis and Simpson's (2010, 2012) (in)visibility vortex, connecting it to

literature examining management and resistance strategies to gendered (in)visibility, followed by existing research related to gendered power in prison work. We then detail our cooperative inquiry and thematic analysis methodology before presenting our findings, which highlight the dimensions of sexualization, risk and fear, and professional competence within the dynamic patterns of the (in)visibility vortex: revelation, exposure, and disappearance. We conclude by discussing the theoretical and practical implications of our analysis.

1.1 | The (In)Visibility Vortex

Visibility and invisibility are central to how gendered power operates within organizations and are closely connected. Visibility and invisibility can be positive, such as when visibility facilitates recognition of work successes, or when invisibility represents acceptance within dominant organizational norms. However, organizations shaped by gendered power operate within a heteronormative, White, able-bodied male norm (Settles et al. 2019; Simpson and Lewis 2005). This often positions women problematically, as both visibly different from the norms and invisible within normative constructs of a good worker (Kanter 1977; Lewis and Simpson 2012; Settles et al. 2019). Thus, women's visibility and invisibility (and the relations between the two) are often linked to exclusion and othering.

Lewis and Simpson (2010, 2012) conceptualize these dynamics through the (in)visibility vortex, a poststructuralist-informed framework that describes processes related to women's (in)visibility within organizations. Gendered norms that sustain masculine privilege and power are at the center of the vortex, preserved and concealed by those who benefit from being within the dominant group through surveillance, judgment, and policing of those outside the normative standard. The norm is also a site of defensiveness and agitation, as those on the outside challenge associated discourses, practices, and privileges. The agitation of the norm is captured through three key components of the vortex: exposure, disappearance, and revelation (see Figure 1).

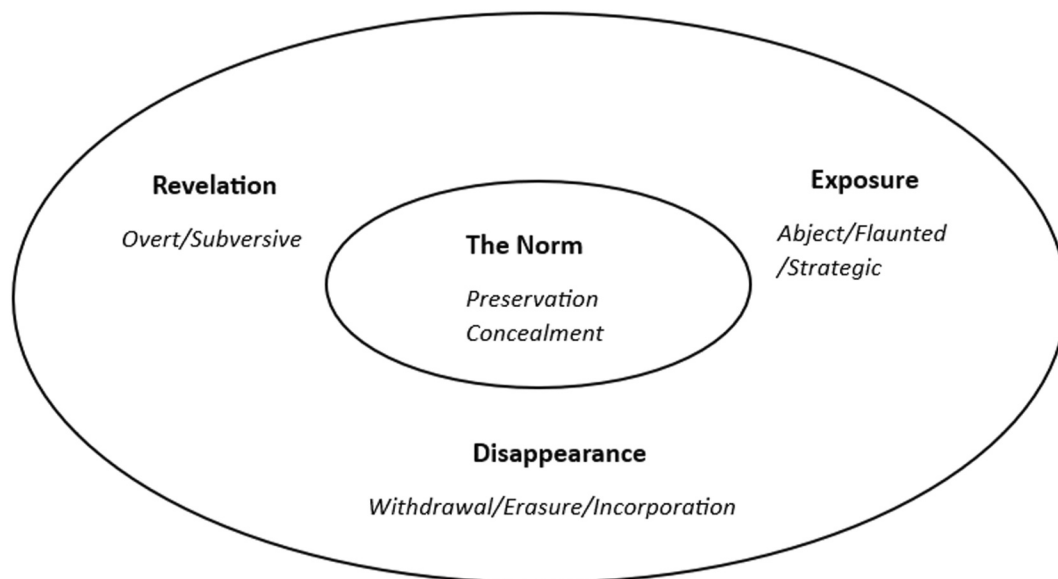


FIGURE 1 | Simplified diagram of the (in)visibility vortex adapted from Lewis and Simpson (2012).

These three components of the (in)visibility vortex are not necessarily sequential, and the vortex framework makes space for aspects of each to occur simultaneously (Lewis and Simpson 2012).

Exposure speaks to how masculine organizational norms render women visible as “other.” Exposure often leads to abjection; however, it may be “flaunted” if a woman can enjoy or benefit from it, or “strategic” if used to highlight an issue (Lewis and Simpson 2012, 151). Disappearance represents both exclusion by others (erasure) and self-reduction of visibility (withdrawal). Developing Lewis and Simpson’s (2010, 2012) conceptualization of the vortex, we argue that in highly masculinized environments, exposure often occurs through sexualization and ridicule. These interconnected mechanisms reduce women to sexual objects and/or failed sexual objects of heterosexual male desire, rendering women visible and exposed while serving to maintain the gendered order by denying women’s legitimacy and authority at work (Abedinifard 2016; Fernando et al. 2019; Wilson and Thompson 2001). Revelation, by contrast, occurs when dominant norms are revealed by those at the margins, through direct challenges (overt), or simply through women’s presence in these organizations (subversive) (Lewis and Simpson 2012).

A growing body of work drawing on Lewis and Simpson’s approach to (in)visibility shows how (in)visibility manifests in male-dominant organizations and the strategies women use to negotiate it. Fernando et al. (2019), for example, highlight how British women engineers are often objectified and sexualized, increasing the visibility of their bodies while obscuring their professional abilities. Their participants navigated this (in)visibility by strategically navigating their interpersonal interactions and, at times, reducing overt signifiers of femininity in their appearance and behavior. Other research identifies similar dynamics in firefighting, military, and prison work contexts, where women minimize their visibility through adopting masculine behaviors and body language; conceal conventionally feminine features (e.g., with baggy clothing); and silently tolerate poorly fitting uniforms or equipment (Beck et al. 2023; Erogul et al. 2023; Kakuk 2020; Steidl and Brookshire 2019; Walker et al. 2025; Woodfield 2016).

Zajiji et al. (2020) used the (in)visibility vortex to examine women’s experiences on South African corporate boards, reporting findings aligning with Lewis and Simpson’s (2012) position that numerical representation alone is not sufficient to overcome entrenched gender norms. While emphasizing the structural nature of (in)visibility, Zajiji et al. also outlined individual strategies used by their participants, such as strategic interpersonal interactions and developing personal confidence and a sense of purpose. Thus, research to date outlines primarily individualized strategies, focusing on self-regulation of the body and strategic interpersonal interactions.

A common theme across this literature is women’s attempts to establish legitimacy through demonstrating competence, professional skill, and work ethic (Erogul et al. 2023; Fernando et al. 2019; Wasserman and Frenkel 2020; Zajiji et al. 2020). Although this too represents an individual strategy that can reinforce dominant norms, professional competence may also challenge gender stereotyping, which positions women as less

capable in many work roles, a norm particularly prevalent in masculine occupations such as military or prison work (Burdett et al. 2018; Erogul et al. 2023; Heilman 2012). In this way, women’s use of competence as a strategy for professional legitimacy helps to highlight the complex relationship between compliance with and resistance to gendered workplace norms (Erogul et al. 2023; Wasserman and Frenkel 2020).

Building on these existing studies that consider (in)visibility, this article identifies an important gap: The lack of theorization around how sexualization, fear and risk, and professional competence operate together within (in)visibility processes. Some studies highlight sexualization (Fernando et al. 2019), and several touch on professional competence (Erogul et al. 2023; Fernando et al. 2019; Wasserman and Frenkel 2020; Zajiji et al. 2020), but theorization of (in)visibility through the combined dimensions of professional competence, fear and risk, and sexualization remains underexplored. This matters because in high-risk, hypermasculine workplaces such as men’s prisons, women’s visibility is shaped not by any single factor but by the compounding effects of being simultaneously scrutinized, objectified, and professionally undermined.

1.2 | Gendered Power in Prison Work

Men’s prisons are an important site to examine the (in)visibility vortex framework, as they are a high-risk, hypermasculine workplace where women are a cultural and numerical minority (Burdett et al. 2018). In Australia, women comprise around 24% of all prison officers, including those working in women’s jails (Jobs and Skills Australia 2025). The traditionally masculine understandings within prison work mean that women are often viewed as physically and mentally less competent and therefore a liability (Burdett et al. 2018; Kakuk 2020). Although no Australian research is available, American research suggests that Black and Indigenous women working in prisons or policing are also subject to these gendered assumptions of incompetence and, additionally, may not receive the same support as White colleagues (Martin-Howard and Garcia-Hallett 2024; Pogrebin et al. 2000). These stereotypes of women (both White and of color) as professionally inferior mean that women in prison work are subject to intense scrutiny of their performance (Burdett et al. 2018).

Unique to the prison environment, workers are also surrounded by large numbers of prisoners while conducting their duties (Burdett et al. 2018; Crawley 2004). This means that in addition to the extensive surveillance technology in these institutions, both security and specialist staff are required to perform their duties while being watched by prisoners and colleagues (Crawley 2004; Norman et al. 2023). Further heightening their visibility, research finds that women in prison work are often subject to sexual aggression and harassment from both colleagues and prisoners (Burdett et al. 2018), while also negotiating contradictory cultural expectations for women to look good at work as a mark of self-respect and professionalism, but not too good, in an effort to reduce objectification (Walker et al. 2025). The men’s prison workplace thus provides a unique and rare insight into the interplay of gender, visibility, and power.

2 | Method

We employed cooperative inquiry (CI), a form of participatory action research in which co-learning occurs in small groups on a mutually decided issue of importance. CI takes an emergent design, following issues that develop during the inquiry that matter to participants. It values plural perspectives, understands knowledge as socially situated, and recognizes that everyday experiences connect to wider systems of power (Riley and Reason 2024).

CI follows the action-reflection cycle of action research, in which participants learn by trialing actions (e.g., thinking or behaving differently or asking others to do so) and reflecting on the outcomes, with a view to personal and social change (Riley and Reason 2024). A group will undertake multiple cycles of action-reflection, exploring their topic in detailed and diverse ways. The traditional researcher role is minimized, with researcher-participants participating collaboratively throughout the inquiry process. This participatory, democratic, and emergent design produces rich insights that can be practically applied. CI links to social justice scholarship that aligns with feminism (Goessling 2025) and is well suited to poststructuralist research examining how systems of power shape our social world.

Sixteen women, including 13 who identified as Australians, three who identified as New Zealanders or of European descent, and two who chose not to disclose, formed four inquiry groups. The ethnic homogeneity of the sample maps onto Australian public sector demographics, which are less diverse than its population (Thodey et al. 2019). Ten participants identified as heterosexual; three as pansexual, homosexual, or gay; and three did not disclose. Aged 25 to 60, participants had worked in men's prisons for between one and 25 years and were employed across six high-security men's correctional centers in one Australian state. Although most participants worked as custodial officers, four worked in specialist positions such as mental health, educational, or administrative roles, a cohort that we chose to include for diversity of perspectives, noting they have traditionally been underrepresented in prison work research (Norman et al. 2023). Participants were fully informed about the research through verbal and written briefs. The project received approval from a university ethics committee. Meetings were held on Zoom to account for shift work and geographical distance.

To foster a sense of safety in the groups, the participants were allocated into inquiry groups by CW, whose insider positioning as a woman working in prisons afforded a nuanced understanding of how to best facilitate group cohesion and participant safety. Wherever possible, administrative participants were not outnumbered by custodial participants, nor were those who divulged minority sexualities outnumbered by participants who identified as heterosexual. Age and level of experience were closely considered to ensure that group members felt professionally respected. CW spoke to all participants in advance to identify potential workplace conflicts and ensure that they understood their options for managing discomfort or withdrawing from the study. Care was taken throughout the inquiry process to support generative group dynamics, in line with cooperative

inquiry principles (Riley and Reason 2024). Relatedly, each group collaboratively set rules at the outset of their inquiry processes, for example, "being respectful and open" and "no swearing." Such activities are likely to have supported the dynamics of disclosure evident in the analysis we present in this article. Each group met online five to six times regularly over a three-month period, creating 21 inquiry sessions. Meetings were scheduled for 1 hour, although, in practice, the length of meetings varied to suit the needs and energy of each group.

Facilitation techniques were led by CW to help the groups engage with the topic and develop their focus areas. Each group started with a similar premise (to explore gendered concerns at work) and then had agency to shape their inquiry's direction toward issues that mattered to them. Actions were collaboratively discussed, and any potential safety or occupational impacts were considered by the group prior to agreement. The participants were aware of the potential publication of research results but preferred to complete the cooperative inquiry without engagement in written outputs. CW summarized key themes back to the groups for validation at each meeting. The rich data produced provided us with an opportunity for subsequent analysis. Within cooperative inquiry, this is conceptualized as propositional knowledge, complementing the experiential and practical forms of knowledge gained during the process itself (Riley and Reason 2024). With permission from the participants, the meetings were audio recorded and transcribed before being analyzed by the authors of this article.

We used reflexive thematic analysis as a conceptually strong qualitative method for identifying crosscutting patterns in complex data that can be used within a poststructuralist epistemological framework (Braun and Clarke 2022). This allowed us to explore the participants' meaning-making during their cooperative inquiry, as well as address key discursive elements of their talk, enabling us to attend to multiple layers of gendered power in our analysis, including organizational talk, institutional practice, and sociopolitical structures (Riach 2023).

Our thematic analysis involved several iterations, with themes generated separately for each group and then combined for further refinement. As the analysis developed conceptually, issues of visibility became important. Reviewing the literature, and after input from our reviewers, we identified how the (in)visibility vortex might offer a useful framework for making sense of the patterns that we identified, and final iterations involved reviewing the analysis through this lens. We assessed analytic integrity at each phase, using Braun and Clarke's 15 quality criteria (2022). Themes were assessed for coherence, congruence, and depth throughout the process.

We reflexively examined the personal positioning of the authors throughout the research, discussing what issues resonated with our own understandings of gender as White, working- and middle-class feminist academics in psychology, sociology, and organizational studies, and what other ways we could make sense of participants' talk. This reflexivity was helped by CW's insider status as a woman working in prisons, who provided contextual details that were key to the nuanced discussions of agency reflected in our findings. For instance, although

excusing or laughing along with sexist behavior might have been interpreted as reinforcing gender norms, CW noted that it can be a way for women prison workers to enhance their sense of safety because being liked was sometimes linked to better responses from colleagues when calling for help.

3 | Findings

Our findings are organized around the (in)visibility vortex concepts of “exposure,” “disappearance,” and “revelation” (Lewis and Simpson 2010, 2012). Abject exposure occurred through sexualization, whereas other forms of exposure (strategic/flaunted) were mostly absent. Disappearance was evident in participants’ talk of erasure by others, minimizing one’s body, and “putting up” with poor treatment. Revelation happened when participants disrupted gendered norms through their professional success and in occasional explicit challenges. Strategic exposure and explicit challenges were typically considered too risky, with fear and risk circulating within the vortex. Sexualization, risk and fear, and professional competence (undermined by others or agentially used as a strategy of revelation) were thus key themes running through the analysis. The analysis shows how the participants made sense of their workplace, the structural norms that were revealed within their accounts, and how our cooperative inquiry method supported both “revelation” and “challenge.” A summary of how the components of the (in)visibility vortex intersected with the dimensions of sexualization, risk and fear, and professional competence is presented in Table S1.

3.1 | Exposure

The participants talked in detail about how women prison workers were made visible in sexual ways. For example, when Sapphire described hearing male colleagues talk about a supervisor:

Strong female leaders that get ridiculed for being strong. Called names, sexualised. Really strong female supervisor that does everything by the book [...] A great leader and people are laughing, calling her 1970. And I’m like, ‘What? What is this 1970?’ And finally, someone said ‘Oh coz she looks like she’s 19 from behind and 70 from the front’.

(Sapphire, custodial officer, late 30s)

In this example, multiple people had ridiculed the appearance of a female supervisor, demonstrating the cultural permissiveness of cruel and sexualized scrutiny of women’s bodies within prison work. The 1970 nickname was also an invitation for more people, who may not have previously scrutinized the body of this female leader, to do so. The objectification of her body served to distract from, and deny, her authority (Fernando et al. 2019). Read through the (in)visibility vortex, this nickname preserved the (masculine) norm of the prison through othering of those on the margins (Lewis and Simpson 2012). Further, the overt sexualization and scrutiny of women’s bodies, even in

front of other women, left the participants aware of their own bodies, and they understood that they may be exposed in the same way. Within the vortex, therefore, this heightened sexualized visibility can be understood as “abject exposure” (Lewis and Simpson 2012).

“Abject exposure” was experienced by all participants; however, the nature of the exposure varied depending on the women’s characteristics. In Sapphire’s example, the 1970 comment simultaneously sexualized the supervisor’s body and drew on the construction of aging women as unattractive. Being an older woman, therefore, risked being subject to sexualized ridicule related to a “failure” to meet heteronormative attractiveness standards. Women who did meet these standards experienced abject exposure through sexualization, which they experienced as extensive and took various forms, including flirtation, harassment, and rumors. Women who were known to be gay were also abjectly exposed in relation to their sexuality: “*I have been told it is a shame I’m gay. And that if I ever change my mind to let him know, so that I can hook up with him and his missus*” (Coral, custodial officer, early 40s). Thus, participants of all ages, sexualities, and appearances experienced sexualization from colleagues.

The unique prison environment compounded women’s sexualized exposure through the ever-present camera surveillance that was part of the prison infrastructure, which included closed-circuit television monitored live by other officers and body-worn cameras that record audio and visual interactions. One participant, understanding her every move to be monitored, explained that she chose particularly comfortable underwear on workdays to avoid being seen adjusting them by male colleagues watching the cameras.

These women were also visible to the hundreds, and in some locations, more than one thousand, male prisoners at their workplace. Participants described managing sexual behavior from prisoners, which ranged from prisoners masturbating in front of them to wolf whistling, staring, or making comments: “*I’ve heard [prisoners say] you know, ‘oh you fat slut and blah blah blah’ and you just turn around and go ‘excuse me, I’m not a slut’*” (Emerald, custodial officer, early 30s). Power dynamics between officers and prisoners have been richly examined in research, recognizing that the nature of prisons and the structures of control within them result in complex interpersonal interactions (e.g., Crewe 2011; Crewe and Ievins 2021). Although many participants, like Emerald above, described their day-to-day management of prisoner behavior with confidence and often humor, sexualized behavior from prisoners was a constant consideration, contributing to women’s sense of exposure.

The participants described sexual assault from prisoners as a rare but serious risk that they managed through vigilant safety practices. Despite their ongoing vigilance, the risk of assault in the workplace was often linked by their colleagues to gendered stereotypes that women were both physically and mentally incapable of such work. This women-as-risk discourse meant that the participants were subject to additional layers of “abject exposure,” as in Amber’s example:

He said ‘You shouldn’t be walking around by yourself. And I was like, ‘Oh, why not?’. And he said, ‘You shouldn’t’ - like and looks me up and down - ‘You shouldn’t be wearing that’. I said, ‘What?’. He’s like, ‘Shouldn’t wear that skirt you’re gonna get raped’ [...] That male officer went on to be a supervisor and a manager. And it was all because I was wearing my issued skirt.

(Amber, specialist, late 30s)

As in the earlier examples, this participant was “othered” through sexualization; however, in this instance, her colleague drew on the women-as-risk discourse to justify his scrutiny and regulation of her body. He constructed Amber’s choice of wearing the skirt as irresponsible, reproducing common victim-blaming narratives of sexual assault (Fairchild 2015), despite the skirt being an approved uniform item. Amber linked his statements to the broader cultural attitudes within her workplace by describing how the man had been promoted twice into management positions.

“Abject exposure” through sexualization was therefore a fundamental part of the participants’ experience of prison work. For Lewis and Simpson (2012), exposure may also be “strategic” when used for the purpose of effecting change and “flaunted” when experienced pleurably. Examples of “strategic exposure” were limited to one participant’s account of using a pink shampoo, which also gave insight into how hair functions as a site of gendered regulation and control. This story was in response to a manager who had unfairly, from her perspective, evoked the regulation of “excessive” hair color with female staff:

He’s spoken to some females that have had some burgundy highlights, and others have had a very, very light pink, and I said to them, “it says excessive hair colour”. To me means half orange, half red [...] I went to work the other day with pink hair. With a pink shampoo. No one said a word. And he particularly - I made sure I made a beeline for him.

(Ruby, custodial officer, late 50s)

The scrutiny and regulation of women’s hair color by local prison management was a common concern among participants. One participant had been hired with bright hair before being informed she was required to dye it a neutral color, and several participants talked of women who had been held back from promotion due to their hair color. Many articulated concerns that male officers’ hair was not subject to this same level of scrutiny.

Hair is regulated within military and paramilitary professions as part of overall grooming standards to achieve a uniformed, externally recognizable, and operationally “ready” appearance (Atkinson et al. 2021; Enokenwa et al. 2023). Yet, researchers have argued that such uniformed appearances are underpinned by traditionally masculine standards and disproportionately affect women through regulation of hair styling and jewelry (Kringen and Novich 2018; Simpson and Croft 2021). The scrutiny and regulation of hair highlights the relevance of

women’s bodies and appearance as disciplinary sites through which masculine organizational norms are preserved and concealed (Kelan 2013; Kringen and Novich 2018). In this context, and observing other women experiencing hair color regulation by local prison management, Ruby chose to challenge this practice, feeling secure at her workplace as a senior officer of 20 years’ service. Using a pink shampoo, she strategically exposed herself to management and was not reprimanded.

Ruby’s temporary pink hair was the only example of “strategic exposure” within this research, and there was none of “flaunted exposure,” where feeling exposed would be pleasurable. This general absence may be because of fear, because exposure risked ostracism and bullying. Some participants also described instances where colleagues had made unfounded accusations about their alleged sexual behavior with prisoners, resulting in workplace investigations that were described as “degrading” and “horrendous.” Participants therefore constructed colleagues as having power over their work experience, career trajectory, and even livelihood: “I’ve got a mortgage to pay... if I do the wrong thing or upset the wrong people, I am gonna be, you know, targeted. And that frightens me”. These findings align with literature outlining the social, professional, or even physical penalties experienced by women who have challenged men (Manne 2017). In the prison environment, acceptance from peers was understood as particularly crucial, as colleagues were required to “have your back” in dangerous situations. These barriers prevented resistance through “strategic” exposure.

3.2 | Disappearance

Disappearance was common within the participants’ talk, including accounts of “erasure” in professional contexts (exclusion by others from being understood as professionally competent), and “withdrawal” (seeking to disappear as a reaction to their treatment). Much of the erasure described by participants was linked to the commonly held construction of women as unsuitable for work in male prisons:

This is the first job I’ve come into where I’m directly treated differently as a female. In so many different ways it’s not funny. And I’ve been in labouring jobs, often in male dominant jobs, I’ve worked security. This is the first time where I’ve kind of been treated as lesser and as, you know, not able to do my job.

(Emerald, custodial officer, early 30s)

Emerald’s treatment as incapable because of her sex reflects the erasure of her professional value. Professionalism and heteronormative “sexiness” are often constructed as mutually exclusive for women in general (e.g., Kelan 2013) and particularly in prison work (Walker et al. 2025; Burdett et al. 2018). In this context, younger, conventionally attractive participants described feeling professionally dismissed and treated as one: “a lot of the time, I can be perceived as just a young, dumb female, which is not the case at all”. These participants described regularly being mistaken for other young female colleagues, with male colleagues or managers confusing their names and sometimes roles. In their visibility through sexualized “exposure,”

these young women were rendered professionally invisible through sexist discourses of attractive women as stupid or incapable and by positioning them as a single entity, unworthy of individual recognition. Theorized in terms of the (in)visibility vortex, these women are both abjectly exposed and erased through denial of their professional competence.

Gay and older participants also reported erasure of their professional abilities linked to those attributes, as in the extracts below:

When you're told, 'Oh, you probably need to be more straight so that you can get promoted in this centre', you know, 'Being gay is going to be a disadvantage to you for being in the centre'. [...] It's implied that if you are more heterosexual and sexual towards these men, that you'll actually do better in your career. And that pissed me off, and I'm like, I shouldn't have to do that. I should get it based on my merit and my worth as an officer.

(Coral, custodial officer, early 40s)

When you get to work it's like 'Okay, no, sorry, you got to be young and blonde to go into Intel'. And the dark haired, it's just a collective kind of noun. But you know, if it happens enough, you know. If there's enough shade thrown, there's a big tree there somewhere.

(Ruby, custodial officer, late 50s)

In both examples, the participants suggested that their career progression was hindered because they were not considered interesting to heterosexual men in management positions. This aligns with previous research suggesting that women in the workplace are often valued by their "sexual attractiveness, availability and usefulness to men" (Duncan and Loretto 2004, 99). As Coral identifies, women's professional value in the prison workplace is erased in these contexts.

The descriptions of missing out on promotion also highlight that erasure for participants was not simply experienced within interpersonal interactions but linked to organizational systems and decisions. Ruby's comment "*if there's enough shade thrown, there's a big tree there somewhere*" and Coral's use of "*it's implied*" acknowledge that there is no direct evidence of why the participants were overlooked, but that it fits a systemic pattern of erasure. For these participants, (in)visibility and its disadvantages were present and recognized, yet intangible, further reducing their ability to challenge the status quo. Although experienced differently for different participants, erasure was a common concern across the whole participant group.

Disappearance through "withdrawal" was also identified when participants described hiding gendered aspects of their appearance. One way this was achieved was by wearing oversized uniforms:

My vest is, it's not really tight. I've normally got, I'm normally freezing so I've got a jumper or cardy on or

my shirts are normally bigger, my pants [trousers] are a bit bigger, that kind of thing

(Pearl, custodial officer, early 30s)

Participants like Pearl understood that baggy uniforms helped hide their bodily shape and chose to wear bigger sizes to manage the scrutiny—and thus abject exposure—from male prisoners. Downplaying a conventionally feminine appearance was also widely understood to help protect the participants from colleagues ("*the more makeup you wear, the more comments you're gonna get. And that's not from prisoners, that's from officers*"). Women in prison work value looking good (e.g., with light makeup and hairstyling) while not looking "too good" to attract unwanted attention (Walker et al. 2025), a contradiction well established within organizational research more broadly (Kelan 2013; Zajiji et al. 2020). Here, the participants minimized their (female) bodies as an individualized strategy of embodied withdrawal to manage the abject exposure they experienced.

Lewis and Simpson's (2012) concept of "withdrawal" also includes situations where women may take up low-profile roles to reduce their visibility at work. Although this was not easily achievable for the women in prison work, who had little choice over task allocation, withdrawal was identified in some participants' accounts of giving up and letting things go, as Amber and Crystal described separately:

I feel like you sometimes have to just cop it on the chin when people say things to you. Because if you react it's like, 'oh, you're so sensitive'. Or if you react it's 'oh, you're in a bad mood today'. [...] You're like, do I react or do I just go in my head 'fuck you, move on'.

(Amber, specialist, late 30s)

I just really, I guess I struggled to come up with an answer of, like, how to make [women's treatment at work] better. Yeah, there's nothing really that comes to mind to make it better, just, nothing has seemed to work before. So yeah, I don't know. I really don't know.

(Crystal, specialist, late 20s)

In different ways, Crystal and Amber argued that challenging the status quo would be fruitless. Amber chose to ignore poor behavior from her colleagues, understanding that challenge would intensify abject exposure, whereas withdrawal allowed her to continue work without further interaction. Crystal explained that she no longer believed change was possible. For many participants, experiences of (in)visibility were constructed as an inevitable part of the working day. Many were subjected to sexualized or misogynistic behavior at such frequency that day-to-day comments were considered unremarkable or unworthy of reaction.

Lewis and Simpson's (2012) third conceptualization of "disappearance" is when women seek invisibility through incorporation into the (male) norm. Some of the participants described instances of other women behaving in traditionally masculine

ways to fit in: “*the new younger girls think they have to come in and be masculine and be one of the boys and try to be tough*”, whereas others identified this in their own behavior. A different “incorporation” strategy involved minimizing the behavior of their colleagues toward women and emphasizing the good men they worked with (“*there’s still a lot of good men there, and it’s just a joke and they don’t mean anything by it*”). This allowed women to participate in “*banter*,” which was constructed as an important element of acceptance into workplace culture.

Yet, for women in prison work, disappearing through aligning with masculine standards was fraught with difficulty. Mica (custodial officer, mid 50s) explained how a female supervisor with an abrupt, traditionally masculine manner remained excluded from the norm: “*Whereas a male supervisor would be strict, she’s been called a bitch, a total cow*”. Thus, the women were required to find an elusive balance of alignment with masculine ideals while also performing gender in accordance with normative femininity to avoid further abject exposure. Previous research has likewise suggested that the “right” way for women in masculine workplaces to exist is never truly achievable (Peterson et al. 2010).

Although alignment with the masculine standards was never fully achievable for participants, disappearance through withdrawal and/or (attempted) incorporation into the norm was a reactive response that participants understood to provide a level of protection from heightened visibility and abject exposure. These responses helped women to continue working in the masculinized prison workplace.

3.3 | Revelation

Lewis and Simpson (2012) suggest that revelation of the norms underpinning women’s inequity at work can be both “subversive,” simply through presence, and “overt,” through direct challenge. As we have identified, overt challenges to the masculine norms at the center of the prison work vortex, and the privilege they confer, were not an easy task. Although we have discussed one participant who strategically exposed herself using a temporary pink shampoo, challenges like this were uncommon among participants due to the penalties, or fear of penalties, imposed to preserve the norm.

The presence and success of women working in men’s prisons was therefore a key way in which underlying norms were revealed. The participants articulated confidence and pride in their professional abilities that could be recognized by (at least some) of their colleagues, as demonstrated by Opal:

I think I get my credibility from the job. Like [the prisoners] get no more, no less than what they’re entitled to. I conduct myself in a manner with my colleagues that I deem to be as professional as a correctional officer can be. And I think at the end of the day, the way I conduct myself by doing all of that allows me to get that credibility

(Opal, custodial officer, late 30s)

Despite negotiating sexualized “abject exposure” and “erasure” of professional competence throughout their workday, this sense of professional pride was present across all participant groups. The continuing presence and professional success of women reveals the absurdity of the normative constructions at the center of the vortex that positioned women as less capable of prison work.

Previous (in)visibility research has similarly identified competence and diligence as a key challenge to the norm (Erogul et al. 2023; Wasserman and Frenkel 2020; Zajjji et al. 2020). However, the excessive scrutiny of women in the workplace often results in (over)performance pressures that can be harmful (e.g., Erogul et al. 2023; Kanter 1977; Zajjji et al. 2020). Thus, although our participants undoubtedly disrupted the gendered order through their professional skills, this came at a personal cost, as they negotiated both performance pressures and sexist interpersonal interactions: “*Not only do we have to go to our workplace and do our job to a high standard, we have to negotiate a heap of transactions along the way, and it is exhausting.*”

The cooperative inquiry methodology provided new opportunities for “revelation” of the norm and avenues for resistance. One particular benefit was the facilitation of safe spaces for groups of women to connect. Sharing stories and experiences provided a sense of validation for participants, as demonstrated by Diamond’s feedback during her last meeting:

It’s been so interesting to see, to hear everyone’s points of view because I was a bit worried that I was the only one that felt like that. So, it’s good to see that lots of other people feel exactly the same way as me.

(Diamond, custodial officer, early 50s)

The methodology linked women together and fostered discussion and action on issues relevant to them. In addition to validation, the cooperative inquiry facilitated more active support. When Coral described feeling overlooked for promotion due to her sexuality, the women in her group worked together to discuss her options. They listened and affirmed her position while also brainstorming ways to address the problem, for example, documenting the comments made to her: “*so that if you did ever choose to use that, you’ve got all those tools in place to support yourself.*”

In a different cooperative inquiry group, the participant who strategically exposed herself with pink hair shared the story with her fellow group members. This story encouraged several participants to extend their support to other women who were experiencing hair color regulation. Shared experiences and understandings between women at work can be considered a form of resistance (Beck et al. 2023). The solidarity, support, and awareness raising through this cooperative inquiry process can likewise be understood as resistance to women’s (in)visibility in prison work, in part because it explicitly revealed the norms underpinning inequity, from which women can develop collective strategies to support each other.

In addition to the more “subversive” strategies of solidarity and validation between women, the cooperative inquiry process

supported the participants to examine possibilities for “overt revelation” of the norm and thus resistance. After reflecting that they usually ignored sexualized or otherwise misogynistic behavior from colleagues, participants in one group decided to try to address these behaviors where safe and appropriate. Some experienced a social penalty for doing so (e.g., getting into arguments, being teased or ignored) but found these penalties were not as severe as expected. Sapphire (custodial officer, late 30s) explained what happened after verbally challenging a man who had shouted at her over his own mistake: “*Afterward, he was pretty peeved. Like, he didn’t really talk to me or look at me much for the rest of that day. Everyone else was fine, and even made a couple of jokes.*”

Other participants found that addressing behaviors through the cooperative inquiry process led to positive interactions with colleagues. After sharing their dislike of male officers calling women “Miss” rather than taking the time to learn and call them by their individual names, some participants completed actions to address this “erasure” and reported positive results:

I’ve had some really positive interactions with males over the last couple of weeks [...] In the conversation I mentioned, you know, what I prefer in the job. And that I prefer to be called [Jewel]. And he said “Oh, thanks for telling me that because I wouldn’t have known that”.

(Jewel, custodial officer, early 50s)

Bringing their experiences back to reflect on with the group, these participants described a sense of satisfaction from addressing behavior. Even those who had experienced negative reactions constructed them as worth the benefits of challenging what they considered unacceptable behavior. The group concluded that to balance self-protection and successful challenge, it was important to be strategic and “pick their battles.” The cooperative inquiry process therefore facilitated safe forms of both “subversive” and “overt” norm “revelation,” opening the possibility for small forms of active resistance and reduced fear of associated risks.

4 | Discussion

In this paper, we explored how gendered (in)visibility shapes organizational inequity for women working in Australian men’s prisons and how cooperative inquiry action research can support the development of strategies to reveal and resist this (in)visibility. We considered Lewis and Simpson’s (2010, 2012) (in)visibility vortex in the under-examined context of prison work, a site marked by constant surveillance, physical risk, and highly masculinized norms. Our reconceptualization of the (in)visibility vortex deepens the theory through exploring the underpinning dynamics of sexualization, risk and fear, and professional competence within this complex environment.

Our analysis found visibility was strongly linked to women’s sexualization. Women were exposed through being constructed as sexual objects (or ridiculed as failed sexual objects) and, in alignment with existing organizational literature, sexualization

and ridicule served to deny women’s professional value (Fernando et al. 2019; Wilson and Thompson 2001). Professional value was further erased through norms that constructed women as less capable and competent at prison work (Burdett et al. 2018). Thus, the participants were rendered (in)visible through simultaneous “abject exposure” and “erasure.” The extensive sexualization, in addition to the regulation of women’s hair color identified in our findings, highlights the relevance of women’s bodies and appearance as disciplinary sites through which masculine organizational norms are preserved and concealed.

Participants responded by hiding feminine bodily curves and reproducing masculine standards of behavior, aligning with the disappearance category of the (in)visibility vortex (Lewis and Simpson 2012) and with other visibility literature (e.g., Beck et al. 2023; Fernando et al. 2019). Except for a minority who felt particularly secure in some workplace contexts, the women in our research described fear of repercussions, ranging from bullying to job loss, if they demonstrated “overt” resistance. In the high-risk prison workplace, participants constructed acceptance from peers as particularly crucial so that their fellow officers would support them better in dangerous situations. Thus, the risk and fear of repercussions appear to be key to maintaining the status quo and, through the lens of the (in)visibility vortex, can be understood as preserving the masculine norms underpinning prison work. Aligning with this interpretation, although Lewis and Simpson’s (2012) model proposed that exposure can be flaunted or strategic rather than simply abject, we found limited evidence of strategic or flaunted exposure within the prison worker accounts.

Revelation and resistance to women’s (in)visibility therefore primarily occurred through the participants’ presence and through their ability to enact agency within existing organizational and social power structures. These findings align with recent (in)visibility research in emphasizing the entanglement between compliance and resistance (Erogul et al. 2023; Wasserman and Frenkel 2020). We link this entanglement to Lewis and Simpson’s (2012) assertion that those closest to the norm are best able to challenge it. The prison worker participants necessarily operated within the gendered structures of their workplace but, through their professional success, directly contradicted normative assumptions that women are unsuitable and incapable of prison work.

Our use of cooperative inquiry makes a methodological contribution to doing feminist research for developing both knowledge of how gendered power operates in organizational cultures and strategies for resistance. Our cooperative inquiry process facilitated a safe space for women to connect, share stories, and discuss issues that mattered to them. Shared experiences and understandings between women at work can be considered a form of resistance (Beck et al. 2023), and the consciousness raising and validation in the inquiry groups enabled the participants to explicitly reveal underlying workplace inequities, allowing the women to develop ways of supporting each other within and outside the groups. The cooperative inquiry process also opened the door to new possibilities for resistance, leading to some practical benefits for group members who engaged in overt challenges. Although

women's (in)visibility in traditionally masculine workplaces remains a problem deeply ingrained within broader power structures, cooperative inquiry was a useful method to facilitate solidarity between women, reveal normative structures, and enable resistance.

The strategies identified in this paper rely on women's action. Although bottom-up action and engagement are critical to successful change, organizations must take responsibility for addressing gendered inequity (Zajji et al. 2020; Wilson and Thompson 2001). The implications of our study suggest that understanding and addressing (in)visibility will be a critical step for prison organizations toward gender equity. Organizations should also examine ways to actively facilitate safe and enjoyable collective spaces for women to drive change. Supporting this approach, future research should consider if the understandings, solidarity, and new ways of thinking born from participatory action projects extend beyond the active phase into long-term workplace benefits in these masculine organizations. Additionally, previous research has highlighted specific, intensified areas of (in)visibility for women of color in Australian workplaces (Nash and Moore 2019). Although our own research had limited representation from women of color, we recommend further research assessing how (in)visibility shapes the experiences of women with intersecting minority identities.

Acknowledgments

Although the views expressed within this article are those of the authors and not Queensland Corrective Services, we would like to acknowledge and thank Queensland Corrective Services for facilitating this research.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.

Table S1: Relationship between Lewis and Simpson's (2012) (in)? visibility vortex components and the dimensions of sexualization, risk and fear, and professional competence.