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Hidden Struggles: Mental Health Determinants and Pathways to Improvement for Female Inmates in Bihar Prisons

Paper Presentation

Two-Day National Conference on Women's Mental Health in
India: Issues, Challenges and Way Forward

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Introduction

Gender inequality is deeply embedded in Indian society, limiting women's access to education, healthcare, economic opportunities, and political participation (Hasan, 2023). The inter-connectedness of incarceration and societal norms presents critical issues for women in the criminal justice system.

Women in India often face incarceration due to non-violent crimes, primarily driven by economic necessity and poverty. The Crimes in India 2021 data showed a disproportionate number of female inmates facing systemic biases and insufficient legal representation.

Female inmates face triple stigmas:

- being a woman,
- being in conflict with the law, and
- being a minority in the justice system (Pandey, 2020).

This stigma, coupled with the male-dominated design of prisons, leads to further isolation from their families and communities.

Women Inmates in
India & Bihar
(NCRB, 2022)



Arrest across India:	182,298
Arrest in Bihar:	10,506
Conviction across India:	24,498
Conviction in Bihar:	780

Women's imprisonment is often viewed more harshly than men's, which increases their mental health struggles and societal marginalization. As a result, imprisonment affects women differently than it does men (Kaur, 2023; Sikand & Reddy, 2017)

Problem Statement

There is a notable lack of research on women's mental health in prison, particularly in the context of Bihar, where the intersectionality of caste, class, and religion plays a significant role in shaping the conditions of prisons and the mental health of the female inmates.

The intersection of gender, class, caste, and religion significantly influences the mental health of female prisoners, particularly in regions like Bihar. Feminist criminology and labeling theory emphasize how societal perceptions perpetuate criminal cycles and mental health issues (Gibbs & Gilmour, 2022; Besemer et al., 2017).

Integration of Erikson's psychosocial development theory into Incarceration, it highlights how imprisonment negatively impacts identity formation and psychological distress in women, particularly due to societal rejection and the shame of breaking gender norms.

Therefore, understanding how imprisonment affects or hinders incarcerated women's psychosocial development can help address their mental health needs.

This study aims to explore the psychological and sociological challenges faced by female inmates and the critical gaps in mental health care within the prison system.

By analyzing systemic and societal issues, the study advocates for better mental health support and improved reintegration programs to facilitate the well-being and social reintegration of incarcerated women.

Methods

Design

Qualitative Case Study Methodological Stance



It offered a more comprehensive and flexible approach, enabling in-depth, multiple perspectives to analyze a complex phenomenon within the natural settings based on the perspective of those involved directly with the phenomenon.

Participatory Observation

Within the female wards of the respective prisons by the research team



Participants and Settings

- 1 Central Prison
- 1 District Prison



400 + Female Inmates across both the prisons

- Diverse backgrounds
- Different type of offenses
- Variety in the lengths of incarceration

Allowed for a context-sensitive approach with a comprehensive picture of the day-to-day lifestyle of female inmates within the prison



Settings

Observations were carried out across several spaces:

- Work areas (ward / hall)
- Common rooms / Outdoor yards

Power hierarchies
Interaction within the environment
Social bonding
Coping mechanisms



Measure

Gathered through multiple sources with the triangulation of documentation, participatory observation, and unstructured interactions with the inmates and jail staff.

Procedure

Access to the selected prison facility through adequate permission from relevant prison authorities and DLSA of Patna.

Brief discussion with the Prison Superintendents on the intention of the visits with simultaneous adherence towards ethical considerations.

II. Field notes & unstructured interaction

Field notes:

Capturing the body language, social hierarchies, and the whole atmosphere of the female ward.

Unstructured interactions:

With the inmates & prison staffs, encompassing how their life is shaped inside the prison.

I. Participatory observation

Immersion in the day-to-day activities
Unstructured interactions

III. Cross-reference with the adequate relevant reports & documents

It allowed a holistic validated understanding of the phenomenon from multiple perspectives, managing to capture both subtle cues and overt behavior that might otherwise be hidden.

Data analysis

Data were thematically analyzed integrated with member-checking to enhance the credibility of the data.

Triangulation of all three data sources, thereby enhancing the transferability of the data.

Triangulation

Case Studies

01

A 40-year old woman

- Mental illness, unable to speak
- Accused of kidnapping
- After a year recollected the home address.
- **Issues in the past-** abandonment by husband, emotionally and psychologically affected.
- Improper legal process considering her mental state.
- **Life in prison-** isolating, no treatment, no psychiatric care.

02

A 25- year old woman

- Accused of murdering her husband.
- **Issues in the past-** matrimonial, conflict, husband- a person with substance abuse issues, quarrels, and abuse, accused by the husband of having out-of-marriage relationships.
- **Life in prison-** gave birth in prison, compulsive behavior, hopelessness, anxiety, separation from one of the children.

03

A woman in her 50s

- Imprisoned for over 10 years
- Accused of a domestic violence incident
- **Issues in the past-** Familial conflicts, accused by the sister-in-law of attempting to kill her.
- **Life in prison-** disconnection from reality, emotional and psychological impairments, isolation, lack of emotional support.
- Could not recognize children during a mulakaati.