

Psychological Pathways of Female Prisoners in India: From Pre-Crime Vulnerability to Post-Incarceration Mental Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

The psychological factors of female incarceration in India require more attention from the mainstream criminological literature. While the debate on prisons in India tends to concentrate on legal and administrative corrections, there has been relatively little attention paid to the psychological factors underlying women's entry into crime and their experience inside prison facilities. Using *Prison Statistics India 2023* and previous research from interdisciplinary perspectives, this paper examines the relationship between the experience of vulnerability, trauma, psychological stress, and female criminality. Specifically, it is argued that many women engage in criminal behaviour not due to their participation in an organized criminal activity but because of their vulnerability to poverty, abuse, social marginalisation, and psychological stress. The study further looks at the role played by prison overcrowding, family separation, and lack of mental health support in emotional deterioration of women prisoners.

Keywords: *Psychological Pathways, Female Prisoners, Pre-Crime Vulnerability, Post-Incarceration Mental Outcomes*

Any analysis of female criminality has to move way from merely being rational or deviant perspectives where criminal behaviour is a product of deliberate choice of natural deviation. From the Indian scenario, women form a small percentage of total prisoners in prisons. According to prison statistic India 2023, out of a total population of 5,30,333, 21,510 were women. According to World Female Imprisonment List sixth edition The United States of America ranks first in terms of having more women prisoners at around 174,607 while India stands at 23,772. Even though women have been fewer in number, the realities of imprisonment present an important issue to explore.

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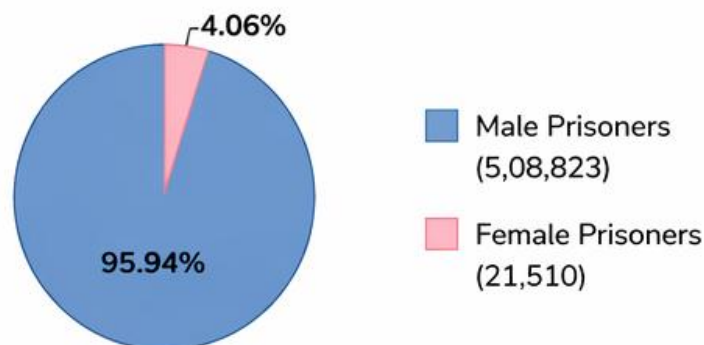
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Figure 1. Distribution of Prison Population by Gender (NCRB 2023)

Category	Number of Prisoners	Percentage (%)
Male Prisoners	5,08,823	95.94%
Female Prisoners	21,510	4.06%
Total Prisoners	5,30,333	100%



Source: Prison Statistics India 2023, National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) [filecite: 0]

“The past history of many women before imprisonment is likely to reflect the presence of poverty, social exclusion, experience of abuse, volatile home lives, and enduring emotional stress. The actions of such women may not necessarily be seen in terms independent of the social environment and relationships in which they have existed. In some instances, their criminal behaviours seem related the long-term build-up of psychological stress, their inherent emotional fragility, and legative experiences of life. The research will analyse the issue of female criminality in India from the psychological angle by examining pre imprisonment vulnerabilities, psychological factors, and prisons experience itself.

Psychological Conditions Prior to Criminal Behaviour

Psychological profile of many Indian women criminals is intimately linked with structural marginalization and social vulnerability. As shown by Prison Statistics India 2023, the prison population in India includes many persons from economically and educationally backward strata; as many as 23.8% prisoners were found to be illiterate and over 41% had secondary education. While these figures apply to the overall prison population, they do give an indication of their socio-economic origins.

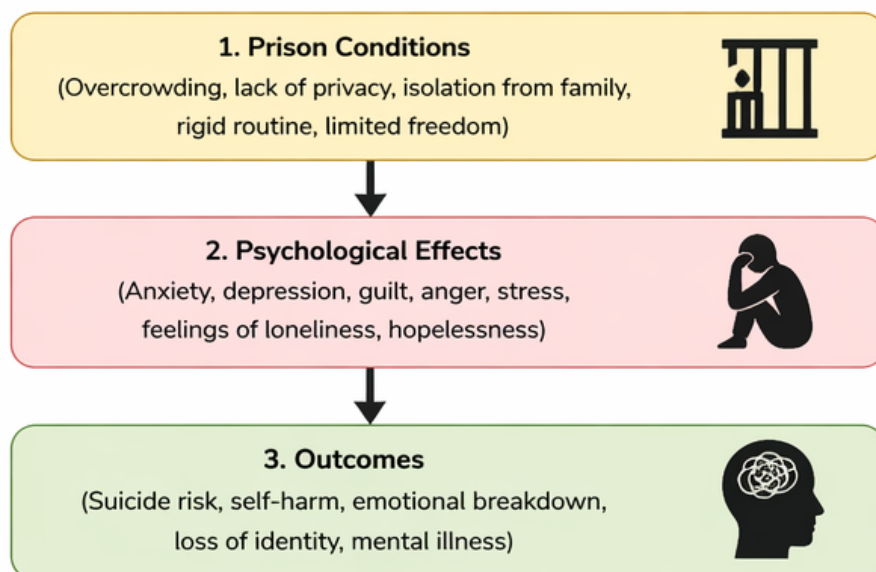
Gender studies researcher Rina Bhattacharyya (2016) pointed out that gender inequity, patriarchal systems of society, poverty, and unavailability of jobs make women prone to violence and exploitation in the community. Structural factors can affect the life of women even prior to being involved in any crimes due to the nature of the existing social context. Institutional factors refer to the fact that prisons in India have been structured keeping men in mind. Therefore, issues related to women prisoners tend to be ignored even in today’s prisons.

Many female inmates suffer from a past life that is characterized by great challenges and trauma. When compared with other members of the society, women in prison tend to be much more vulnerable to victimization through various means including child sexual or

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physical abuse, domestic violence, and rape among others. This results in the constant psychological stress that characterizes their lives.

Figure 2. Psychological Impact of Incarceration on Women



Economic disparity and lack of employment options in the economy may expose women to being economically vulnerable, thus engaging in criminal behaviour to earn their living. Participation in criminal behaviour by women can be influenced by many things including the economic environment, social environment, and culture. These considerations will play a key role in developing preventive strategies.

The state of poverty coupled with lack of resources creates a situation where people's mindset is geared towards survival rather than thinking beyond their current circumstances. The decision-making process in this context does not necessarily follow logic and is based on urgency and necessity. Over time, this situation builds a mental state where taking risk is common practice and legal aspect come second to one's survival. On top of struggling economically, many women are victims of interpersonal traumas, ranging from being physically abused at home or subjected to emotional abuse, and even neglected. Psychological research shows that trauma can significantly affect the ability of an individual to regulate their emotions and think logically. People who experience adverse condition become highly reactive, thus being prone to rash and defensive behaviour. Under these circumstances, criminal activity might not be the result of deliberate behaviour planning but rather a response to long term emotional suffering.

Another important mental state to consider is a person's sense of learned helplessness. If someone constantly find themselves in situation that they cannot affect and where they have no power whatsoever, the end to develop a feeling of helplessness, which makes resisting any negative influence more difficult. In the case of women offenders, this can manifest in susceptibility to coercion, particularly within abusive relationships or exploitative environments.

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Psychological Processes Underlying Criminal Behaviour

The type of crimes committed by women is yet another illustration of the psyche and circumstances surrounding such an act. According to NCRB figures, a large portion of crimes committed by women is related to offences concerning human body, which includes many of the interpersonal types of offences. It means that many of the crimes committed by women are highly associated with personal feelings and surroundings and not necessarily organized crime.

In A study of Incarcerated Women in India, the researcher found that many women who commit crimes came from poor families financially and socially. Some factors leading to such a fate for women were poverty, unemployment, lack of education and failure to get bail.

From the psychological point of view, this type of behavior might be considered in the light of emotional stress and accumulation of psychological distress. Psychological studies have clearly indicated that trauma leads to inability to regulate emotions, poor coping skills, and even impaired cognitive functioning. In this regard, most of the actions are performed on the basis of feelings such as anger, desperation, fear, and helplessness. As a result, many crimes committed by females can be viewed as impulsive rather than well-planned. The social aspect is also an essential feature of female behavior because, in contrast to conventional approaches that tend to consider individuals separately from their environment, women's actions are connected with relations with other people. Thus, women can commit a crime at home, when being influenced by their husbands, or in response to relational issues.

Psychological Impact of Incarceration

The transition from pre-crime life to incarceration introduces a new set of psychological challenges. The prison environment in India is characterized by structural constraints that directly affect mental well-being. NCRB data indicates that prisons operate at an occupancy rate of 120.8%, reflecting significant overcrowding. These circumstances lead to the situation of permanent stress when the absence of personal space and poor privacy cause anxiety and irritability.

Mental health problems among prisoners are common worldwide. Studies show that women in prison are far more likely to experience mental health disorders than women in the general population. A study on women prisoners in India noted that incarceration often leads to psychological stress, anxiety, emotional isolation, and trauma, particularly due to family separation, social stigma, and inadequate prison support systems.

For women, the psychological burden of incarceration is further intensified by separation from family, particularly children. The NCRB reports that 1,318 women prisoners were living with 1,492 children at the end of 2023, indicating that motherhood remains a central psychological concern even within prison. For those separated from their children, the experience often leads to guilt, emotional distress, and a fragmented sense of identity.

meta-analysis on women convicts highlighted that incarceration has significant psychological effects on female prisoners, including depression, anxiety, emotional trauma, and feelings of social isolation. The study further observed that experiences of abuse, stigma, and inadequate mental health support within prisons intensify the psychological distress faced by incarcerated women.

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women's criminal behaviour infrequently linked to unresolved psychological trauma rather than inherent criminality. A recent scoping review reported high prevalence of PTSD, depression, anxiety, and substance abuse among incarcerated women, many of whom had prior histories of victimization and inadequate mental health support. The lack of proper psychiatrists, counsellors, and mental health support services in women prisons also exacerbates employees emotional distress, especially those who already have some form of trauma, anxiety, or social isolation.

Another issue of concern is mental health in prisons. According to the report, 9, 095 prisoners were found to be mentally ill. Considering the shortcomings of reporting systems, this number probably is not representative of the real level of psychological distress. The presence of suicide cases, with 96 inmates taking their own lives in 2023, further underscores the severity of mental health challenges within the prison system.

Rehabilitation and Psychological Intervention

Despite these challenges, efforts toward rehabilitation are evident within the prison system. NCRB data indicates that thousands of inmates received counselling, education, and vocational training during 2023. Such interventions have the potential to improve psychological well-being by providing structure, purpose, and a sense of self-worth. The Chief Justice of India emphasized that justice should move beyond punishment and focus on rehabilitation and renewal.

A study conducted in Haryana involving 250 female inmates and 50 prison officials across ten districts examined the rehabilitation and reintegration of women prisoners. According to the report, 58 percent of the inmates were unemployed, 41 percent were illiterate and 74 percent of the inmates claimed that they needed rehabilitation support, which revealed the socio-economic and psychological issues of incarcerated women.

Yet, the magnitude of these attempts is not adequate in comparison to the demand. There are a few trained psychological professionals available, and intervention is usually general and not individual. Consequently, although these programs can be of help to some prisoners, most of them end up developing psychological distress that remains unresolved.

Inadequate prison conditions often worsen the psychological distress of female inmates. Former prisoners have reported severe overcrowding, lack of privacy, and limited access to basic necessities such as water. Aparajita Bose noted that nearly 45 women were accommodated in a single small room at Presidency Correctional Home in Kolkata, reflecting the stressful living conditions within prisons.

A study conducted in four jails of the Meerut zone in Uttar Pradesh examined 150 women prisoners to analyse the rehabilitation and reintegration facilities available to female inmates. The study found that women prisoners faced inadequate educational, vocational, medical, and mental health support, while overcrowding and lack of family contact further affected their rehabilitation. It also noted that women constitute only 4.1% of India's total prison population, yet their rehabilitative needs remain largely neglected within the prison system.

Post-Incarceration Psychological Outcomes

The psychological effects of imprisonment do not end upon release. Former inmates often face stigma, social exclusion, and difficulty reintegrating into society. These challenges can

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reinforce feelings of inadequacy and isolation, potentially leading to further psychological deterioration.

Women released from prisons often experience a form of double stigmatization arising from both their gendered social position and their identity as former prisoners, which further complicates reintegration into family and community life.

Women prisoners in India have also been the focus of recent studies, which have further highlighted the psychological effects of being incarcerated which often have an effect even after their release out of prison. Most ex-prisoners face social rejection, strained family ties, and are challenged by the process of restoring social identity once released. Stigmatization and low levels of acceptance by the community tend to add to emotional insecurity, anxiety, low self-esteem, and fear of returning to society.

Figure 3. Psychological State Before and After Incarceration

Before Prison (Pre-Incarceration)	After Prison (During/In Post-Incarceration)
Exposure to trauma, abuse, and violence	Institutional stress and harsh prison environment
Poverty-related stress and economic insecurity	Isolation from family and social networks
Emotional instability and fear	Increased anxiety and depression
Low self-esteem and self-worth	Identity loss and stigma
Dependency on family or partner	Struggle for independence and reintegration
Hope for survival and change	Uncertainty about future and acceptance

Source: Synthesized from NCRB 2023 [filecite: 0] and psychological literature (2020–2024)

Although certain people can be transformed in a positive way by new skills and routines, most of them find themselves in a paradoxical state of not fitting in the society and not being able to forget their prison life. This results in a mental condition of doubt and displacement, which predisposes the possibility of returning to maladaptive behaviours.”

CONCLUSION

The experiences of women prisoners in India show that criminal behaviour by women is usually governed by a multifaceted complex relationship of psychological distress, structural inequality, social marginalization, and traumatic life experiences. To most women, the doors of incarceration are not only due to economic deprivation and lack of opportunities but also due to years of abuse, emotional vulnerability, manipulative relationships, and lack of social support. Learning about female offending in terms of punitive or legal lenses thus offers a partial knowledge about the actualities of women being involved in crime.

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The results presented in this paper also suggest that imprisonment is often a factor that exacerbates preexisting mental weaknesses. The existence of overcrowded prisons, isolation, and separation with children and family members, absence of privacy, and mental health services all add up to anxiety, depression, trauma, and emotional degradation among women inmates. Despite the fact that rehabilitation programmes, counselling initiatives and vocational training are still valued elements of the correctional administration, their effectiveness still remains low due to poor infrastructure, lack of trained professionals and personalized psychological interventions.

Another issue that is noted in the paper is the need to have a more gender-aware and trauma-sensitive conception of correctional justice in India. Women inmates cannot be considered as a homogenous category that is characterized solely by criminal behavior; most of them have a history of victimization, neglect, and emotional distress that persists to influence their psychological health even in prison. These underlying conditions can be treated as a prerequisite to rehabilitation as well as the minimization of the long-term cycle of psychological distress, social ostracism, and recidivism.

More efficient correctional system would then involve putting more focus on mental care, emotional recovery, family support systems, educational prospects, and gender-sensitive prison policies. To go beyond simply custodial model to a psychologically informed model of rehabilitation could do more to aid not only individual reintegration but also social justice in the Indian prison system as a whole.

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Conflict of Interest

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