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# Challenges and Psychological Impacts of Incarceration on Women Convicts - A Meta Analyses

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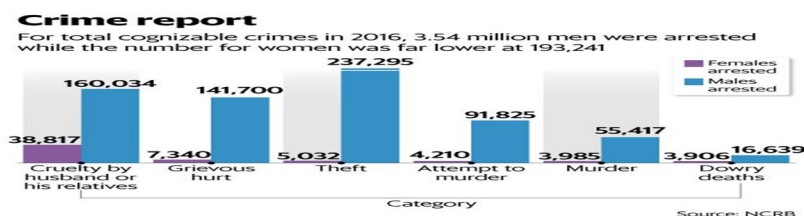
**Abstract:** The study evaluates the psychological impacts of incarceration on women convicts. According to study statistics majority of female prisoners suffer from emotional, sexual and physical abuse. Lack of adequate treatment or community support leads to crime and conviction. This study sought to explore women prisoners' perceptions of the impact of imprisonment on their health. In the past 2 decades, the number of female prisoners diagnosed with psychological disorders has risen sharply to more than twice the level of male prisoners. Female prisoners are 20 times more likely to die by suicide and suffer with suicidal tendencies than women of the same age in the general population. This qualitative study involved adult women prisoners in two central prisons in India. Focus groups and individual interviews analyzed how imprisonment impacted negatively upon their health. The initial shock of imprisonment, separation from families and enforced living with other women lead to serious mental health problems. Over the longer term, women complained of detention in unhygienic facilities by regimes that operated to disempower them, including in the management of their own health.

**Keywords:** Incarceration; Psychological impacts; Women convicts.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The psychological challenges those women prisoners in Indian jails are forced to experience in order to survive the prison experience. In India women in prisons experience, emotional, psychological, and social victimization. Due to cultural and traditional reasons, women are often seen as restorers of social norms, traditions, customs, morality and family cohesiveness in the country. For reasons stated above, female convicts face a much larger shame dynamic as compared to their male counterparts. Based on the research done for the paper, it has been observed that in majority of cases, women end up committing the crime due to poverty, poor education, homelessness, physical and sexual abuse. Statistics have been consistent in reporting that men commit more criminal acts than women[5]. There are specific sociological theories that analyze the gender ratio among criminals. The disparity in socialization, life events, home life, and relationships are considered as the major reasons for the gender gap in the commitment of crimes [1]. Female convicts all over the world face specific pains and deprivations arising directly from their imprisonment. Prison alters them by weakening their emotional life and eroding their identity. The population of Indian women prisoners increased by 61% over the past fifteen years, it surpassed the male growth rate of 33% but infrastructure within these prison systems refuses to keep up with this rising population, leading to inhuman treatment of female inmates[2][3]. The Indian prison system is ill-equipped to deal with specific problems of female prisoners. In fact in most jurisdictions, women are offered fewer programs than men, and the services provide little recognition of the traumatic paths that led them into the criminal justice system[11]. Since the population of incarcerated females is small, they are often placed in prisons far from their home and community making it hard for them to have visitors, community ties, and necessary financial help. Deprived of guidance and help to deal with these issues, women convicts are often released from prisons unprepared to manage their pre-existing problems as well as those created by their imprisonment [4].

### A. Statistics of Female Prisoners



As per most recent data available from the end of 2015, there are 4, 19,623 persons in jail in India. Women constitute 4.3% of this figure, numbering a total of 17,834 women. Of these, 66.8% (11,916) are undertrial prisoners [7]. In India, an analysis of prison statistics at five-year intervals reveals an increasing trend in the number of women prisoners – 3.3% of all prisoners in 2000, 3.9% in 2005, 4.1% in 2010 and 4.3% in 2015 were women[7][8]. While women prisoners continue to be a minority in all parts of the world (less than 10%) female prison population has increased faster than the male prison population on every continent [6]. A majority of female inmates are in the age group of 30-50 years (50.5%), followed by 18-30 years (31.3%). Of the total 1,401 prisons in India, only 18 are exclusive for women, housing 2,985 female prisoners [10]. Thus, a majority of women inmates are housed in women's enclosures of general prisons Uttar Pradesh by far has the highest number of women in prison (3,533), followed by West Bengal (1,506), Maharashtra (1,336) and Madhya Pradesh (1,322). The Union Territories, apart from Delhi (579), have a particularly low number of women in prison[9].

#### *B. Classification of Female Offenders According to NCRB*

- 1) *Habitual and Casual Prisoners:* A habitual offender is a person who has repeatedly committed the same crime. The nature, scope and type of habitual offender statutes vary but generally they apply 97 when a person has been convicted a minimum of twice for various crimes. [12]
- 2) *Convicts:* A convicted person is the one who is found guilty of a crime and sentenced by a court. The Model Prison Manual has defined convict as: "Any prisoner under sentence of a court exercising criminal jurisdiction or court martial and includes a person detained in prison under the provisions of Chapter VIII of the Code of Criminal Procedure of 1973 and the Prisoners' Act of 1900"[13].
- 3) *Undertrials:* The term 'undertrial' denotes an unconvicted prisoner i.e. one who has been detained in prison during the period of investigation, inquiry or trial for the offence s/he is accused to have committed[18].
- 4) *Detenue Prisoners:* Detenue means any person ordered to be detained and committed to a place of detention by any authority. Detenues are those persons who are involved in terrorist and other militancy related activities [14].
- 5) *Adolescent Prisoner:* Any person who has been convicted of any offence punishable with imprisonment, who has been committed to prison custody during the pendency of his trial and who at the time of commitment, is not less than 18 years, but not more than 21 years of age [15].
- 6) *Civil Prisoner:* Any prisoner who is not committed to custody under a writ, warrant or order of any court or authority exercising criminal jurisdiction, or by order of a court martial and who is not a detenue [16].
- 7) *Young Offender:* A person who has attained the age of 18 years and has not attained the age of 21 years [17].

#### *C. Understanding Female Criminality*

- 1) *Biological Viewpoint:* According to Caesar Lombroso, biological makeup is the major reason for female defiance. According to Pollak, emotional instability and hormonal changes during menstruation, pregnancy and menopause are the contributing factors for female criminality. [20][24].
- 2) *Sociological Viewpoint:* Women in India face inequality at every phase of life. Indian women are expected to be homemakers at a very young age, thereby missing most of the opportunities in life which in turn affect her financial independence and economic status. In most cases, crimes women commit are considered to be final outward manifestations of an inner medical imbalance or social instability. [21]
- 3) *Psychological Viewpoint:* Stress is higher for women on average than for men, primarily due to blocked opportunities, and the conflicting message of motherhood versus work. Women experiencing peaks of stress are more likely than men to explode with episodes of extreme uncontrolled violence.[22].

#### *D. Findings from the Analyses: General Challenges faced by Female Prisoners*

For decades, prisons have always taken into consideration the needs of the male majority. Lack of consideration to the varied requirements of women inmates have resulted in the neglect of their human rights [25].

In the majority of Indian prisons women inmates face social injustice. They often lack access to :

- 1) Adequate female Prison staff
- 2) Good Sanitation and Hygiene
- 3) Good dormitories
- 4) Proper infrastructure

- 5) Accessible healthcare
- 6) Access to Legal Aid
- 7) Social and emotional support

#### E. Psychological Impacts of Incarceration

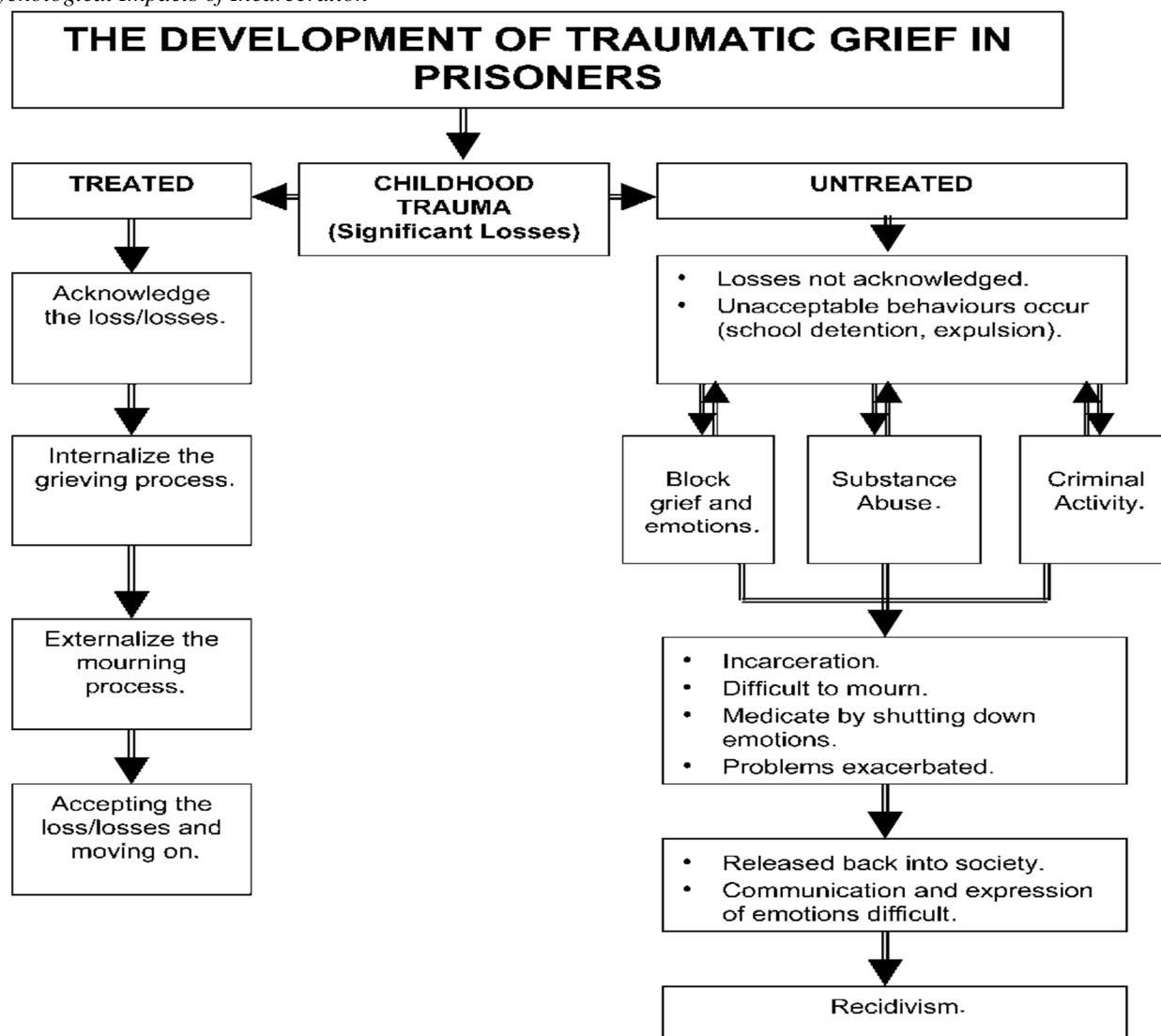


Figure 1 : Process of Trauma flowchart [30]

Prison statistics reveal that a large fraction of female prisoners are diagnosed with psychological disorders, a number alarmingly higher than those of male prisoners with mental health issues [26]. Studies suggest that most of the female prisoners are victims of emotional, sexual and physical abuse from childhood. The inability to choose, trust issues, lack of emotional support and fear brings about major changes in the personality of women convicts. Compared to their male counter parts, female prisoners face significant mental conflict. Female prisoners also suffer from suicidal tendencies due to post traumatic stress disorder [30].

Violence in a women's prison unit is almost non-existent in Indian jails, but there is a lot of manipulation and bickering that takes place in prison cells. Majority of incarcerated women come from backgrounds that never had healthy models of conflict resolution, From the negative relationships and experiences of the past, they often tend to act out and blame others [26][27]. During the interview process, the participants indicated that they felt a sense of emotional numbing and detachment from life, they deliberately conceal their feelings and suppress their emotions to survive inside the prison. The researcher attributes this to the overuse of solitary confinement, overcrowding and other inhumane conditions within prisons.



About three-fourths of women prisoners are mothers, the majority of them gave birth under the age of eighteen. The distance between the prison and their homes, lack of interaction with children and family, limited financial sources and confinement compromise a woman prisoner's ability to maintain these relationships [28]. They also experience trauma due to the forced separation imprisonment brings. This in turn leads to emotional reactions such as anger, anxiety, depression, and aggression.

Someone who is traumatized is vulnerable, which can lead to problems expressing emotions. Many a times, something that is as insignificant as a smell can act as a trigger, leading to antisocial behavior. This aggressive behavior leads to harsher punishment. Prison then becomes a terrifying experience, rather than a place for rehabilitation and change. These bitter experiences push them into a cycle of recidivism that becomes difficult to stop [29].

## II. CONCLUSION

This meta analysis has shown that women prisoners experience high levels of anxiety and stress. When released without providing proper measures to decompress themselves from a strictly confined environment, prisons tend to do more long-term damage to these women. They lack social and occupational skills to function in the outside world. This study reveals that female prisoners have significantly higher rates of psychological issues, hence it is vital that trauma-informed care needs to be provided to enhance healing and rehabilitation. By providing quality mental health and legal counselling, taking necessary measures for holistic rehabilitation, and providing positive reinforcement can help women in prison get the care they need and once they are released they can lead a better life and be positive contributing members of our society.

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