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EXPLORING THE SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH PROBLEMS FACED BY FEMALE PRISONERS IN PUNJAB

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ABSTRACT

Female prisoners represent one of the most vulnerable and marginalized groups within correctional institutions due to their gender-specific social, psychological and physical needs. Despite growing international emphasis on gender-responsive prison reforms, limited research has examined the lived experiences of incarcerated women in Pakistan. This qualitative study explores the socio-psychological and physical health challenges faced by female prisoners in selected prisons of Punjab and examines institutional factors influencing their wellbeing. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 female prisoners and 10 prison officials from Central Jail Lahore, Women Jail Multan and District Jail Faisalabad. Secondary data included peer-reviewed literature, government reports, prison regulations and policy documents. Thematic analysis revealed that female prisoners experience depression, anxiety, emotional distress, family separation, social stigma, overcrowding, inadequate healthcare, limited reproductive and maternal health services, delayed judicial processes, insufficient psychological support and restricted rehabilitation opportunities. These interconnected challenges negatively affect their physical health, mental wellbeing, dignity and prospects for successful reintegration into society. The study identifies significant institutional gaps in delivering gender-responsive correctional services and concludes that comprehensive prison reforms are essential. Strengthening healthcare and mental health services, improving prison infrastructure, reducing overcrowding, ensuring timely access to justice and expanding rehabilitation programs are critical for protecting prisoners' rights and promoting their successful social reintegration in Pakistan.

Keywords: *Female prisoners; socio-psychological problems; physical health; prison conditions; rehabilitation; qualitative research; Punjab, Pakistan.*

INTRODUCTION

A prison is a state-operated institution where individuals accused or convicted of criminal offences are lawfully detained. Traditionally, prisons were established to punish offenders and protect society by restricting offenders' liberty. However, modern correctional systems increasingly emphasize rehabilitation, skill development, and social reintegration to reduce reoffending and promote public safety (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2023).Pakistan's prison system originated during British colonial rule and continues to operate under legislation derived from that period, including the Prison Rules. Although the

correctional philosophy now recognizes rehabilitation as a primary objective, many prisons continue to face challenges such as overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure, insufficient healthcare, limited rehabilitation programs and staff shortages. These issues reduce the effectiveness of correctional institutions and contribute to recidivism (UNODC, 2023; Asian Development Bank, 2024).

Types of Prisons Prisons are classified according to the characteristics and security requirements of inmates.

- **Juvenile prisons** accommodate offenders below the age of 18 and focus on education, counselling and rehabilitation.
- **Minimum-, medium- and maximum-security prisons** differ according to the level of supervision required, with maximum-security facilities housing violent and high-risk offenders.
- **Psychiatric correctional facilities** provide treatment for offenders with serious mental health disorders.
- **Military prisons** detain military personnel or prisoners of war who violate military laws.
- **Federal and state prisons** exist in many countries depending on the legal jurisdiction of offences.
- **Jails** generally detain individuals awaiting trial or serving short-term sentences, whereas **prisons** confine convicted offenders serving longer sentences.

In Pakistan, prisons are broadly categorized as **Central Prisons, District Prisons, Special Prisons** and **Sub-Jails**, each serving different administrative and security purposes.

Prisoners

A prisoner is a person who is legally deprived of liberty after arrest, conviction, or while awaiting trial. Prisoners differ in their criminal backgrounds and may include first-time offenders, habitual offenders, individuals with substance use disorders and persons experiencing mental health problems. Modern correctional systems classify prisoners according to the nature of their offence, criminal history, security risk and rehabilitation needs to ensure appropriate management and treatment (UNODC, 2023).

Female Prisoners

Female prisoners represent a small proportion of the total prison population but have distinct social, psychological and healthcare needs. They include both convicted prisoners and under trial detainees. In Pakistan, dedicated women's prisons are limited; therefore, many women are accommodated in separate sections of general prisons. Female prisoners require gender-sensitive healthcare, counselling, vocational training, and family support services to facilitate successful rehabilitation and reintegration into society (UN Women, 2023; Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 2024).

Problems Faced by Female Prisoners

Female prisoners experience multiple challenges during incarceration that affect their overall well-being. Separation from children and family members, inadequate healthcare, poor living conditions, limited mental health services and insufficient rehabilitation programs significantly affect their quality of life. Women with previous experiences of trauma, domestic violence, or substance abuse are particularly vulnerable to psychological distress while in custody (World Health Organization, 2023).

Pregnant women in prison often face inadequate prenatal and postnatal healthcare, poor nutrition and unhygienic living conditions, increasing health risks for both mothers and infants. Furthermore, overcrowding, lack of privacy and limited access to reproductive healthcare further compromise women's physical health (WHO, 2023; UNODC, 2023).

Studies also indicate that female prisoners experience high levels of anxiety, depression, stress, post-traumatic symptoms and emotional distress. Limited contact with family, social isolation, stigma and incidents of harassment contribute to poor mental health outcomes. Access to professional psychological counselling and trauma-informed care remains inadequate in many developing countries, including Pakistan (Hussain & Forrester, 2022; Penal Reform International, 2023).

Social Problems

Female prisoners frequently experience social isolation, family disruption and separation from children, stigma, discrimination, and loss of social support. These factors negatively affect rehabilitation and successful reintegration after release (UN Women, 2023).

Psychological Problems

Common psychological problems among female prisoners include anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), emotional distress, suicidal ideation and psychological trauma resulting from imprisonment, previous abuse, and inadequate mental healthcare (World Health Organization, 2023).

Physical Health Problems

Women in prison commonly face inadequate medical care, poor nutrition, reproductive health problems, infectious diseases, chronic illnesses and limited maternal healthcare. Pregnant prisoners are particularly vulnerable due to insufficient prenatal and postnatal services and poor prison living conditions (UNODC, 2023; World Health Organization, 2023).

Objectives of the Study

The study is designed to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the social, psychological, and physical health problems experienced by women prisoners.
2. To assess the availability of social, psychological, healthcare, and rehabilitation facilities provided to women prisoners within the prison.
3. To evaluate the level of satisfaction of women prisoners regarding the prison environment and the services available to them.

Rationale of the Study

Correctional institutions are intended not only to punish offenders but also to facilitate their rehabilitation and successful reintegration into society. Modern prison systems aim to achieve several objectives, including punishment, deterrence, incapacitation and rehabilitation. Rehabilitation is supported through educational opportunities, healthcare services, psychological counselling, vocational training, and social support programs that help prisoners develop positive attitudes and life skills (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2023).

Women prisoners constitute one of the most vulnerable groups within correctional settings because they often experience multiple social, psychological, and physical health challenges during incarceration. In Pakistan, limited healthcare facilities, inadequate mental health services, separation from family members, overcrowding and insufficient rehabilitation programs further increase their vulnerability (World Health Organization [WHO], 2023; Human Rights Commission of Pakistan [HRCP], 2024).

This study seeks to examine the social, psychological, and physical health issues faced by women prisoners in Punjab and evaluate the adequacy of prison facilities available to address these challenges. The findings are expected to provide evidence-based recommendations for improving healthcare services, psychological support, prison conditions and rehabilitation programs, thereby contributing to better health outcomes and successful social reintegration of women after their release.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What social, psychological and physical health problems are experienced by women prisoners?
2. What social, psychological, healthcare and rehabilitation facilities are available to women prisoners within the prison?
3. To what extent are women prisoners satisfied with the prison environment and the services provided?

Research Gap

Existing literature has extensively examined prisons as institutions for punishment and rehabilitation. Previous studies have highlighted several challenges within prison systems, including

overcrowding, inadequate healthcare services, poor living conditions and limited rehabilitation opportunities, all of which negatively affect prisoners' well-being (Walmsley, 2024; Penal Reform International, 2023).

Research has also shown that under trial prisoners are frequently housed with convicted prisoners, creating additional security, psychological and management challenges. Female prisoners are particularly vulnerable because they often experience greater emotional distress, family separation and inadequate reproductive healthcare and limited access to psychological support (WHO, 2023).

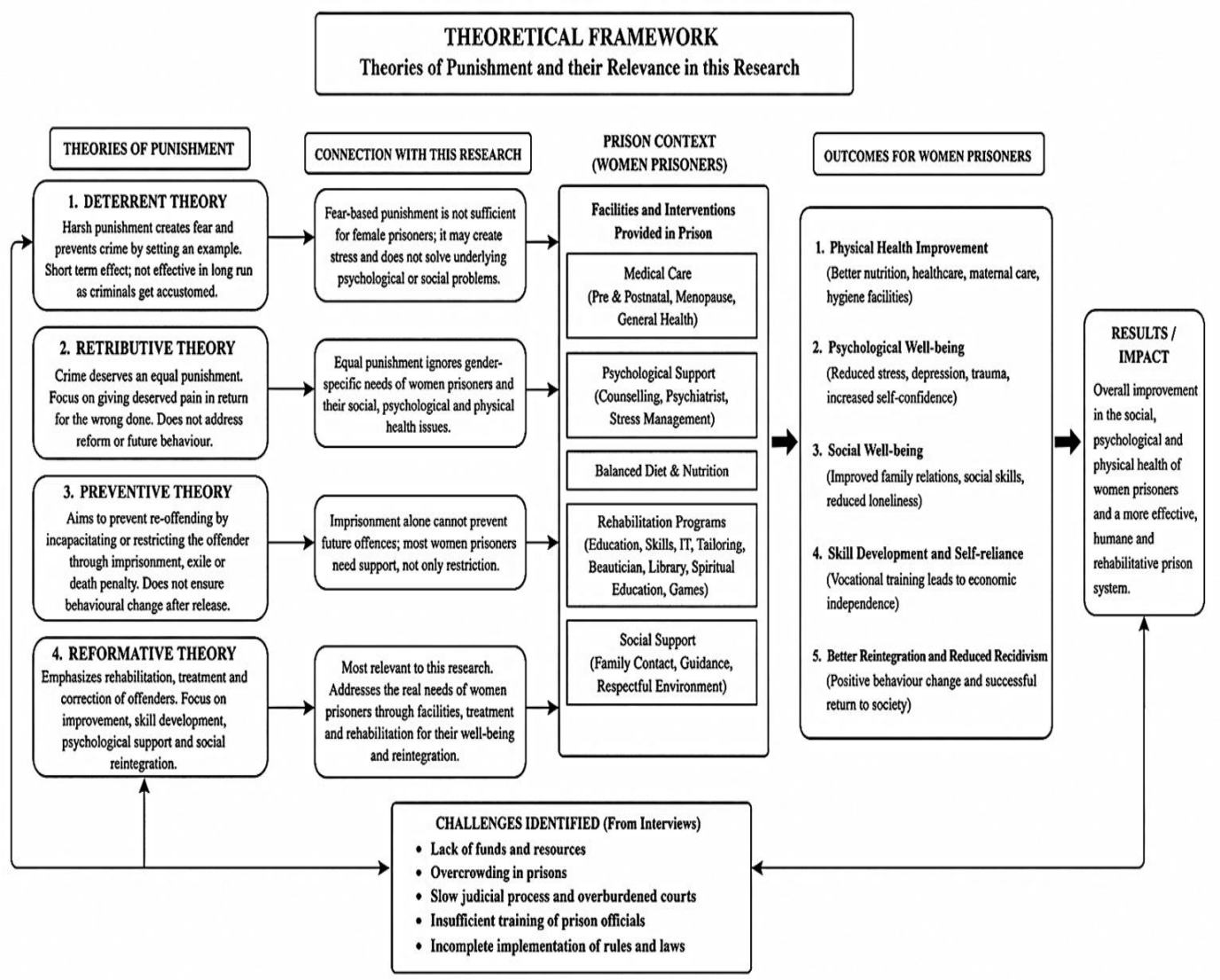
Although previous studies have documented the social, psychological and physical health problems of women prisoners, limited empirical research has simultaneously examined these three dimensions within the prison context of Punjab, Pakistan. Furthermore, little evidence is available regarding prisoners' satisfaction with prison facilities and the effectiveness of existing support services. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive assessment of women prisoners' social, psychological and physical health conditions, the facilities available to them and their level of satisfaction with the prison environment.

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to women prisoners incarcerated in **Central Jail Lahore, Punjab**. Due to time, financial, and accessibility constraints, data were collected only from this prison; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to all prisons in Pakistan.

The study focused on the social, psychological and physical health of women prisoners, the healthcare and support services available to them and their level of satisfaction with the prison environment. Participants were selected regardless of their age, educational background, marital status, type of offence, or duration of imprisonment. The study provided an overall assessment of the challenges faced by women prisoners rather than comparing different categories of inmates.

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Research Design and Methodology

Nature and Design of the Study

This study adopted a qualitative research design within an interpretivism paradigm to explore the social, psychological and physical health issues experienced by women prisoners. An inductive approach was employed, allowing themes to emerge from participants' experiences rather than testing predetermined hypotheses.

Universe and Research Setting

The study was conducted in **Central Jail Lahore, Women Jail Multan and District Jail Faisalabad**. These prisons were selected because they housed female prisoners and provided access to the target population. Punjab was chosen due to its large prison population, diversity and accessibility.

Sample and Sampling Technique

A total of **30 participants**, including **20 female prisoners** and **10 prison officials** were selected through convenience sampling. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved.

Data Collection

Both primary and secondary data were used. Primary data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, while secondary

data were obtained from books, journal articles, government documents, reports, legislation and other relevant publications. Interviews were conducted in Urdu and lasted approximately **45–60 minutes**.

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and translated into English where required. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis through an inductive and iterative process. The researcher repeatedly reviewed the transcripts, assigned codes, identified recurring patterns, developed themes and interpreted the findings according to the research objectives.

Field Experience and Observation

During data collection, the researcher encountered challenges such as restricted access to respondents, confidentiality concerns, and institutional security procedures. Field observations indicated overcrowding, inadequate healthcare services, limited psychological support, shortages of trained female staff, insufficient recreational facilities, and outdated prison infrastructure.

Ethical Considerations

Permission was obtained from the relevant prison authorities before conducting the study. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all respondents and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process.

Results and Discussion

Social Problems Faced by Women Prisoners

The findings revealed that women prisoners experienced social isolation, separation from their children and families, social stigma and emotional rejection during imprisonment. Many participants reported that incarceration negatively affected their family relationships and made reintegration into society more difficult after release. These findings are consistent with recent studies showing that imprisonment disrupts family bonds and social support systems, particularly for women who are often primary caregivers. The loss of family contact and fear of community rejection contribute to emotional distress and social exclusion (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2023). Similarly, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2024) emphasized that maintaining family relationships is essential for prisoners' mental well-being and successful reintegration into society.

Psychological Problems of Women Prisoners

The study found that stress, anxiety, depression, loneliness, emotional trauma and fear of the future were the most common psychological problems experienced by women prisoners. Participants also reported inadequate access to professional psychological counselling and psychiatric services within prisons. These findings are supported by Van Hout, Fleißner and Stöver (2023), who reported that women prisoners experience significantly higher rates of mental health disorders because of previous trauma, domestic violence and separation from children. Likewise, WHO (2024) reported that untreated mental health conditions remain one of the major public health concerns in correctional institutions and recommended trauma-informed psychological care for incarcerated women.

Physical Health Problems of Women Prisoners

The findings indicated that women prisoners experienced numerous physical health problems, including inadequate nutrition, menstrual health issues, pregnancy-related complications, menopause, poor hygiene and limited access to specialized healthcare services. Prison officials also acknowledged shortages of female medical specialists and healthcare resources. These findings support the United Nations Bangkok Rules (UNODC, 2023), which require prisons to provide gender-responsive healthcare, reproductive health services, prenatal and postnatal care and adequate nutrition for women prisoners. Similarly, recent WHO (2024) guidelines emphasize that prison healthcare should be equivalent to healthcare available in the community.

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Rehabilitation Programs and Prison Facilities

Both prison officials and female prisoners acknowledged that rehabilitation programs such as vocational training, computer education, tailoring, beautician courses, religious education, library services and recreational activities contributed positively to prisoners' rehabilitation. However, participants believed that these programs remained inadequate because of limited funding and resources. These findings are consistent with recent evidence indicating that education, vocational training, and psychosocial interventions improve prisoners' self-confidence, employability and successful reintegration while reducing recidivism (UNODC, 2023). Recent studies further recommend expanding rehabilitation programs to meet the specific needs of women prisoners (Van Hout et al., 2023).

Prison Environment and Institutional Challenges

The findings showed that overcrowding, shortages of prison staff, inadequate healthcare facilities, insufficient funding and delayed judicial proceedings adversely affected prison management and prisoners' well-being. Prison officials explained that these structural constraints limited their ability to provide effective rehabilitation services. Similar findings have been reported by the World Health Organization (2024), which identified overcrowding and resource shortages as major barriers to providing quality healthcare and rehabilitation in correctional institutions. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2023) also highlighted that inadequate prison infrastructure reduces the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs and negatively affects prisoners' quality of life.

Prisoners' Satisfaction with Prison Facilities

Although participants appreciated the efforts of prison staff, most expressed only partial satisfaction with the available healthcare, counselling services, hygiene facilities, nutrition, and opportunities for family interaction. They emphasized the need for permanent psychologists, improved medical care, greater availability of female healthcare professionals, and better rehabilitation facilities. These findings are supported by **WHO (2024)** and **UNODC (2023)**, which recommend that correctional institutions adopt gender-responsive prison management, strengthen healthcare services, improve mental health support, and promote family contact to enhance prisoners' well-being.

Interpretation through the Reformative Theory of Punishment

The findings strongly supported the **Reformative Theory of Punishment**, which views imprisonment as an opportunity for rehabilitation rather than merely punishment. The availability of education, vocational training, healthcare, counselling, and rehabilitation programs reflected the principles of this theory. However, inadequate implementation, overcrowding, insufficient funding, and shortages of trained staff reduced the effectiveness of these services. The findings therefore suggest that strengthening rehabilitation programs and improving prison conditions can enhance the social, psychological, and physical well-being of women prisoners while reducing the likelihood of reoffending, which is consistent with the recommendations of UNODC (2023) and WHO (2024).

Conclusion

The present study examined the social, psychological and physical health conditions of women prisoners in Central Jail Lahore and assessed the availability of prison facilities and rehabilitation services. The findings revealed that women prisoners experienced multiple challenges, including depression, anxiety, stress, loneliness, family separation, social stigma, inadequate healthcare, poor nutrition, menstrual and pregnancy-related health problems and limited access to psychological counselling. Although prison authorities were making efforts to provide healthcare, vocational training, education, religious instruction and rehabilitation programs, these services remained insufficient because of overcrowding, inadequate funding, shortages of trained staff and delayed judicial processes.

The study further found that rehabilitation programs played an important role in improving prisoners' skills, confidence and readiness for reintegration into society. However, the absence of comprehensive psychological services, gender-responsive healthcare and effective implementation of prison policies limited the overall effectiveness of rehabilitation efforts. The findings support the Reformative Theory of Punishment, which emphasizes rehabilitation, correction and successful reintegration rather than punishment alone.

Overall, the study concluded that improving prison conditions, strengthening rehabilitation programs, ensuring access to quality healthcare and psychological services and enhancing family and community support are essential for protecting the rights and well-being of women prisoners and reducing recidivism in Pakistan.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Female prisons should be provided with qualified psychologists, psychiatrists, gynecologists and female healthcare professionals to address prisoners' mental and physical health needs.
2. Adequate healthcare services, balanced nutrition, menstrual hygiene products, prenatal and postnatal care, and essential medicines should be ensured for all women prisoners.
3. Vocational training, literacy programs, computer education, entrepreneurship training and skill-development programs should be expanded to improve prisoners' employability after release.
4. Regular psychological counselling, trauma-informed care, stress management sessions and substance abuse rehabilitation programs should be introduced in all women's prisons.
5. Prison infrastructure should be improved by reducing overcrowding, upgrading living conditions and ensuring access to clean water, sanitation, and recreational facilities.
6. Prison officials should receive regular training on gender-responsive prison management, human rights and mental health, rehabilitation and communication skills.
7. Delays in judicial proceedings should be minimized to reduce prolonged detention and overcrowding in prisons.
8. Family visits, social support programs and community reintegration initiatives should be strengthened to facilitate successful reintegration after release.
9. Government agencies should allocate sufficient financial resources to improve prison administration, healthcare services, and rehabilitation programs.
10. Future studies should include women prisoners from different provinces of Pakistan to provide a broader understanding of prison conditions and rehabilitation needs.

Policy Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for prison administration, policymakers, the judiciary, law enforcement agencies and civil society organizations.

- **For Government:** Increase budgetary allocations for prison healthcare, rehabilitation programs, and prison infrastructure while ensuring effective implementation of existing prison laws and the United Nations Bangkok Rules.
- **For Prison Administration:** Develop gender-responsive prison policies, strengthen rehabilitation services, recruit qualified female healthcare professionals and improve institutional capacity through regular staff training.
- **For the Judiciary:** Reduce delays in criminal trials, encourage alternatives to imprisonment for minor offences where appropriate and monitor prison overcrowding through effective case management.
- **For Law Enforcement Agencies:** Promote coordinated efforts with correctional institutions to improve prisoner welfare, rehabilitation and reintegration while protecting prisoners' fundamental rights.
- **For Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs):** Collaborate with prison authorities in providing legal aid, psychological counselling, vocational training, educational programs, family support and post-release reintegration services.

- **For Society:** Community awareness programs should be initiated to reduce stigma against former women prisoners, encourage social acceptance and promote employment opportunities that support successful reintegration and reduce recidivism.

The implementation of these policy measures would strengthen the rehabilitation process, improve the physical, psychological and social well-being of women prisoners and contribute to a more humane, effective and gender-responsive correctional system in Pakistan.

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