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Experiences of Women Inmates: An Exploration in Chowduar Jail Cuttack

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Abstract

The study focuses to understand the sociocultural backgrounds, daily routines, psychological health, and access to institutional support systems of women inmates at Chowduar Jail, Cuttack. It is often observed that women face a lot of social stigma, gendered expectations, and a lack of facilities specifically designed to meet their needs, women inmates frequently face additional difficulties. Exploring the rehabilitation programmes provided to the inmates as per the Odisha Prison Manual is also one of the objectives that we are focusing on this study. This study uses qualitative and quantitative techniques, such as in-depth interviews and observation, to record the stories of 32 women both convicts and under trial who are incarcerated in order to reveal the complexity of their lives behind bars. The results draw attention to problems like emotional distress, strained family relationships, lack of privacy, and restricted access to healthcare, and insufficient rehabilitation programs. The study also looks at their goals and coping strategies after being incarcerated. This study adds to the conversation about prison reform by elevating the voices of female inmates.

Keywords: *Prison Management, Prison Inmates, Prison Manual, Prison Reforms*

1.0 Introduction

The physical and psychological challenges faced by women in Indian Prisons include overcrowding, lack of sanitation, cleanliness poor nutrition, lack of education or awareness programmes, violence and the risk of pregnancy and childcare. There are various laws that protect women and provide them with access to necessities but often it is observed that there are human rights violations against the inmates. (Behind Bars and Beyond: Navigating the Terrain of Gender Justice in Indian Prison, 2024). Women inmates often faces unique challenges in their daily lives especially systematic issues witnessed behind the bars which reflects broader gender inequalities between male and female inmates. Women in prison often witnesses inequalities based on their socio-economic background, caste, class and race which often impacts their daily lives inside the jail. Women Prisoners often get marginalized and socially ostracized, and they often face economic challenges compared to their male counterparts (Sapra, 2023). However, the criminal justice system often fails to meet the requirements of the women inmates as the system is modelled based on the male centric frameworks. The lack of adequate rehabilitation programmes often gives a psychological toll on women inmates (Bhatia & Sanjaya, 2024).

This research explores the lived experiences of 32 women inmates both convicted and under trial in Choudwar Jail Cuttack, Odisha. Choudwar Circle Jail's development from the colonial penal designs of the former Cuttack Jail demonstrates a dramatic change in the philosophy and architecture of prisons. The change indicates a broader trend

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on contemporary prisons that emphasizes on rehabilitation than on punishment. Choudwar Jail which opened in 1991, has modern security features and amenities are designed specially to focus on the welfare of inmates. With a colonial design that prioritized control and confinement over rehabilitation, the original Cuttack Jail has been in operation since 1881 (Waits, 2017). The historical significance in Odisha's fight for independence is highlighted by the fact that it was used as a detention facility for freedom fighters (Krasnow & Parker, 1997). The 26-acre Choudwar Circle Jail has perimeter towers and high-security blocks that are indicative of contemporary prison architecture trends (Hanink, 2017). It has a museum which showcases the adaptive reuse of former prison buildings to preserve historical narratives is being built out of the remnants of the old jail, especially Ward No. 15 (Szuta & Szczepański, 2019).

Rehabilitation programs within correctional facilities are designed in such a way that it addresses the causes of criminal behaviour. These programs include various types of vocational training, educational training, and counselling courses which helps them for social reintegration. These initiatives lie in their potential to reduce recidivism improve inmate behaviour during incarceration and foster long term social stability upon release. Inmates who participate in these programs and learn a new skill are less likely to reoffend than the ones who did not participate in any such programs or who have not been involved in any kind of work. There are various programmes that are offered in Cuttack especially for women inmates such as phenyl making, plantation activities, spiritual classes, pickle, papaad making workshops and various beauty training courses for women, even though there are various trainings offered but it is still observed that women do not involve in regular work, or regular activities which takes a toll on their mental health. However, if these trainings could have been applied on their daily lives prison environment could have been safer and more friendly to live in which will support more constructive and humane criminal justice system. Shifting the focus from mere containment to meaningful transformation rehabilitation affirms the potential of personal growth even through incarceration.

2.0 Literature Review

The experiences faced by the women inmates residing in Chowduar Jail, Cuttack reflects the broader narrative of female incarceration across various contexts. Historically women residing in prisons have been neglected and often being asked to live with their male inmates which in certain cases had increased the risk of the women inmates. Various reform attempts have been made which aimed at improving conditions of women often met with resistance which often shows the gender discrimination behind the bars. ("Incarcerated Women," 2017). Research indicates that female inmates place a higher value on relationships during incarceration compared to their male counterparts, hence the social and emotional support is required for emotional wellbeing and institutional adjustments. Women tend to commit fewer behavioural infractions suggesting to their adjustment to prison life is closely linked to emotional factors such as stress or anxiety (Zettler, 2020). Successful reintegration into society will help to highlight the transformative potential of a supportive correctional environment, the rehabilitation programs often include counselling, psychological support and various educational opportunities (Wahab, 2024).

Labelling theory can be associated with feminist criminology it is applied to explain the societal reactions which specially affects women offenders, emphasizes the correlation of gender crime and deviance. The deviant behaviour of women can be interpreted through various societal expectations tied to femininity and moral standards, often resulting in harsher or biased labelling based on the cultural norms. Women are often being socialized to seek social approval and authority may internalize these labels more powerfully, influencing their self-identity and increasing the likelihood of continued deviance. The Labelling theory point to the role of patriarchal power structures that shape how deviance is defined and managed, it also reflects the gender biases in social control. The gendered process of labelling and social control that lead to the marginalization and stigmatization of women in the criminal justice system can be highlighted through labelling theory. (Jakhmola et al., 2023). Women's criminality often relates to social economic and relational factors that differ significantly from men.

As per the Odisha Prison Manual 2020 women prisoners should be housed separately from male prisoners in their own wards or enclosures, with female under trial prisoners being separated from convicted ones to ensure security as

specified in Rule 868 of the Odisha Prison Manual[1]. No female inmates should be allowed to leave their premises or employed outside it, which would help in maintaining security and privacy (Rule 872)[1]. The typical work that should be assigned to women prisoners includes light tasks such as spinning yarn, pounding, husking or sifting grains while cooking by themselves is prohibited and grinding grains is only used as a form of punishment (Rules 878 and 879)[1]. Healthcare focusing on special needs of women should be mandated for female inmates including the availability of female medical officers, gynaecologists, and psychiatrists and medical interventions like haircutting are only permitted on medical advice due to infestations or disease. (Rule 884)[1]. Children under four years old may stay with their mothers inside prison and children aged four to six years may be allowed at the discretion of superintendent; appropriate clothing diet and creche facilities to be encouraged. (Rule 881)[1] Privacy and decency should be taken care off, female prisoners be searched exclusively by female warders in the presence of senior women personnel (Model Prison Manual Rule 24.15)[2]. Women Prisoners are classified as convicted, habitual offenders, adolescents and undertrial, detailed registers documenting their identities and reasons for imprisonment and admission details are maintained.

Various Welfare measures emphasize education, vocational training, counselling, legal aid, and psychological support tailored for women, with encouragement for NGO and governmental collaboration in rehabilitation and aftercare[1]. Premature release is given special consideration, particularly for women who are sole breadwinners or lack surrogate care for dependents. However, if we look at the trainings that are being given to male inmates compared to female inmates are far more diverse and can be adapted in their daily lives.

As per the Strain theory Merton it explains how social structures within society may pressure individuals to involve in criminal activities. He argues that society sets culturally acceptable goals such as success or wealth nut does not give equal opportunity to everyone to attain them. When people are unable to do so through legal channels because of systematic obstacles like discrimination, poverty or lack of education they feel pressured, which lead individual to adapt deviant or criminal behaviour as an alternative way to achieve such goals (Merton, 1938).

3.0 Observation and Analysis

The analysis provides a systematic examination of the data collected during field visits, interviews and institutional records focusing on the lived experiences of prison inmates and implementation of correctional practices within the setting of Choudwar Jail, Cuttack. The direct engagement with prison environments in Choudwar Jail Cuttack it uncovers the socio legal realities behind incarceration, patterns of criminal offenses, access to rehabilitation programs, and the challenges faced by incarcerated women. It focuses beyond theoretical assumptions to assess the effectiveness of institutional interventions such as vocational training, counselling and legal aid. The empirical approach enables a grounded understanding of the gaps between policy and practice and provides insights to the transformative potential of gender sensitive correctional reform

4.0 Income Level of Inmates

As mentioned in the chart we can see the prisoners living in Choudwar Jail Cuttack 34.38% of inmate monthly family income was less than Rupees 10000, which indicates that the people involved consists from a low economic background. The kind of work that they typically involve in are construction work, household maids, caregiver in private sector, housewives, and farmers. Next we can see 28.13% of the population is earning less than 20000 which implies 28.13% of the population these population is mostly involved in private sector, housework, housewives, farming, business etc, 21.88% of people are earning more than 21000 monthly hence we can keep them under middle range income group these people are mostly engaged in business, white collar jobs, IT sector, banking and finance sector etc. Lastly 9% of people are completely unemployed they have no source of monthly income mostly because all of their family members are in jail, and they have no source of employment as of now.

[1] **ODISHA MODEL JAIL MANUAL RULES FOR THE SUPERINTENDENCE AND MANAGEMENT OF JAILS IN ODISHA. (n.d.). In** *https://prisons.odisha.gov.in/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/31958-jail-manual-677240-GKclAxfK.pdf*.

[2] **Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative. (2010).** *STANDARDS BEHIND BARS ORISSA*. **https://humanrightsinitiative.org/publications/prisons/standards_behind_bars_orissa.pdf**

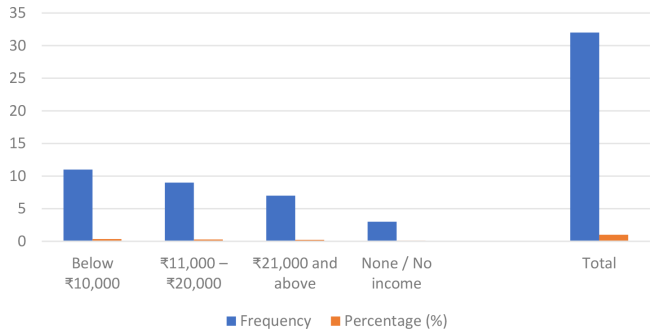


Figure 1. Income Level of the Inmates.

Hence, through figure 1, this we can see due to limited access of opportunity or due to financial strain to meet the daily needs of achieving goals set by the society may lead to engage in criminal behaviour. This also indicates the structural inequalities and limited economic opportunities for women can increase their likelihood of coming into conflict of law. Although a small portion of inmates earns 21000 or more showing that not all inmates are from impoverished backgrounds their minority status reinforces the idea that economic vulnerability plays a critical role. Additionally, people with no income at all, likely dependents, unemployed, or homemakers further underscores the socio-economic disadvantages faced by many women in custody. These findings support the need for gender sensitive rehabilitation strategies that address the root causes of women's criminalization, such as vocational training, micro finance initiatives and self-help groups which would help to promote economic independence and social reintegration.

5.0 Type of Crime Committed

The type of crime committed by women reveals various important insights. As observed in the figure 2, the largest number of cases falls under the category of '302' which typically refers to murder according to the Indian Penal Code. This category outweighs all others, indicating that murder is the most frequent crimes committed in Odisha. Next there is a significant decline in the number of cases for other crimes such as Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances followed by few or almost negligible cases for the remaining categories including 420 case, 292 (obscenity), 376D and 366 (Sexual offenses and Kidnapping), Section 20, Vigilance Raid and kidnapping case under 363. This sharp drop off highlights that these crimes are either less common or less frequently recorded within data.

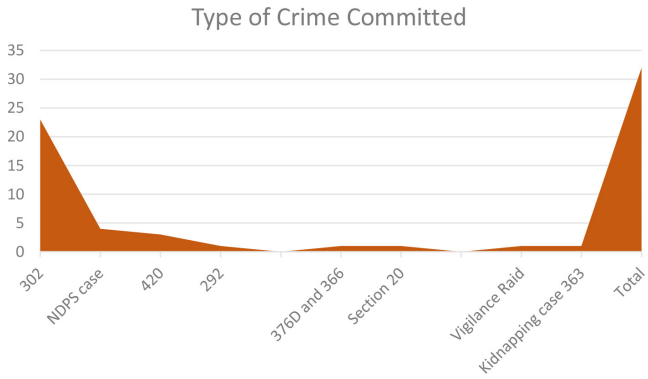


Figure 2. Type pf Crime Committed by the women living in Choudwar Jail.

The above figure 2, observations, it becomes clear that the crime profile that mostly people are involved in murder cases, with other crimes constituting only a small fraction. Law enforcement resources might need to be prioritized toward preventing and investigating murders, while also acknowledging that the rarity of other crimes could inform more targeted strategies for crime prevention and policy making.

6.0 Rehabilitation Programs Provided

As per the Odisha Jail Manual ongoing counselling to be provided to the women prisoners and their families with the help of NGOs and social activists. This would help to rebuild self-confidence and reframe criminal attitudes. However as per recent observations mental health counselling is not been done which destroys the self confidence among the prisoners. Project KIRAN, launched in 2021 by Odisha's Directorate of Prisons in Partnership with NGO MAADHYAM, focuses on providing free legal aid, mental health counselling and rehabilitation support facility especially for women, it includes a help desk, mini library and provision of e-mulakat facilities to maintain family connections. As per 23 inmates in figure 3 it is observed that various vocational trainings have been organised such as salon training, plantations workshops, bari making and aachar, papad making workshops, phenyl making workshops. As per the inmates these trainings were very helpful it helps them to keep themselves mentally engaged and increases productivity.

Women Prisoner's are often being trained with various rehabilitation programs such as agriculture,

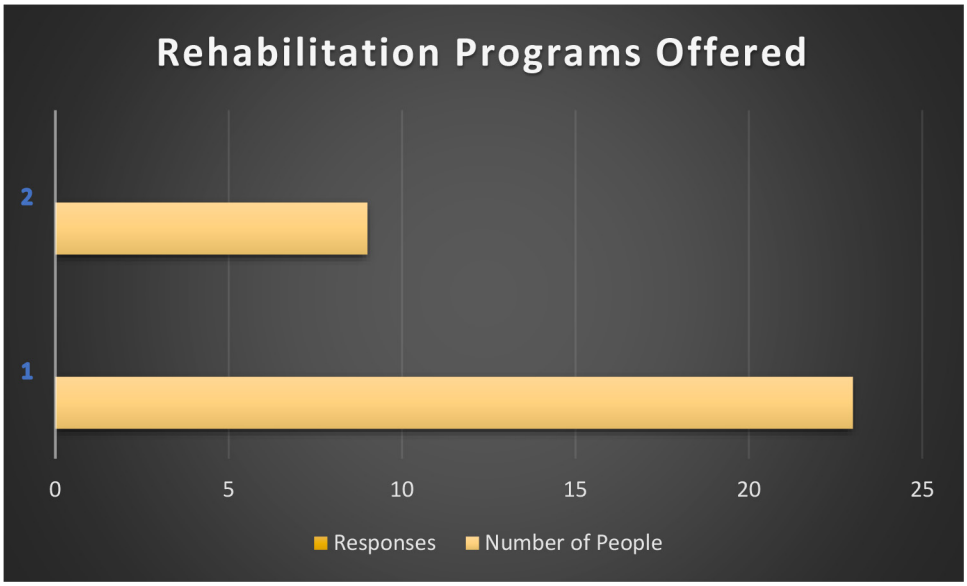


Figure 3. Rehabilitation Programs offered to Inmates.

plantation, food processing, weaving, makeup trainings new age programs such as radio jockey trainings, mobile and computer repair, paramedics etc. It is observed that the trainings are not given on a daily basis mostly the trainings are provided after 6 months to one year and not everyone has compulsion to participate in it.

7.0 Awareness on Prisoner's Rights

As per figure 4, it is observed that 90.63% of women inmates are not aware of their rights only 9.38% of women are aware of their rights. The lack of awareness indicates a critical gap in prison administration and rehabilitation efforts. Literacy and awareness of rights are foundational

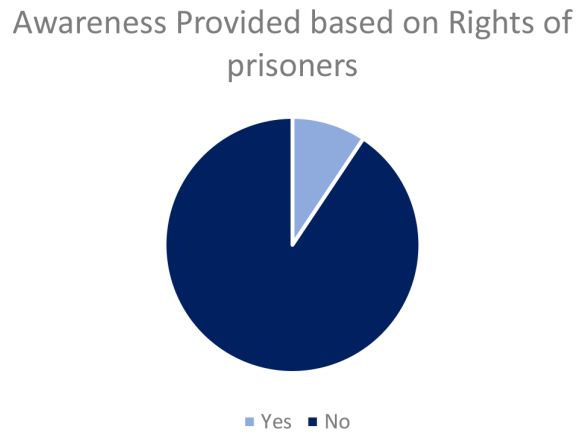


Figure 4. Awareness Provided based on the Rights of Prisoners.

to ensuring humane treatment, fair access to legal resources, and empowerment of inmates. The absence of such programs suggests neglect of legal aid initiatives which shows failure in implementation, the inmates are vulnerable to exploitation and the disconnect between policies manuals and ground realities.

Hence ensuring access to information about legal rights is essential for empowering inmates, fostering accountability and promoting a rehabilitative, rather than punitive prison environment. Regular awareness programs must be institutionalised and monitored to bridge this gap and uphold the dignity and rights of women inmates.

8.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The exploration of women inmates and their lived experiences reveals a complex interplay of historical neglect, unique challenges and the potential for rehabilitation there are significant strides have been made in understanding and addressing the needs of female inmates, ongoing systemic reforms are essential to ensure their rights and well-being. The narratives and research highlight the importance of tailored support systems that recognize the distinct experiences of women in incarceration and their reintegration to the society. Despite the progress in understanding women's incarceration, there remains a critical need for further research to

explore the long-term impacts of incarceration on women and the process of reintegration. As observed that women mostly face mental health issues, lack of motivations while residing inside prison, even rehabilitation programs are there but the rate of implementation or implementing the skills that they have learnt while being in jail are significantly low. Rehabilitation programs and assigned tasks should be made a compulsion so that everyone could learn new skills which in future might decrease the recidivism rates.

If we look at the cleanliness of Choudwar Jail, it has been observed that it is well maintained and cleaned on a daily basis and all the facilities and food is being provided on a timely basis. The problem arises when it was observed that the urge for the female inmates to live is very low, on being questioned they answered that there is no work to do here on a daily basis which results in lack of motivation. It is advisable that if the inmates can work on a daily basis as per the guidelines it would help them to improve their mental health. Games should be organised for female inmates on a weekly basis to keep them active.

Even though it was observed that medicines and medical facilities are provided from time to time, doctor visits are done but the eating habits still remains a question. Three meals are provided on a daily basis but no special meal or any kind of nutrition is provided for the ones who suffer from diabetes or any other chronic disease. The availability of canteen is there but however it is not possible for everyone to afford the canteen on a daily basis. The Jail manual mandates the prenatal and antenatal care, creche facilities, school to be provided to the children residing inside jail considering the age factor upto 6 years[1]. However, it was observed that the child residing with her mother is often lagging behind basic care such as access to schools

Various vocational trainings are there for the inmates as per the Odisha Prison Manual 2020 but unfortunately the implementation level is low. Rehabilitation programs are organised once in every 6 months or 1 year, it is recommendable that if the programs can be organised on a daily basis.

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