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A Dilemma of Living in the Society: A Socio-Cultural Insight into Mental Health Challenges of Ex-Prisoner Women in India

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Abstract

The reintegration of formerly incarcerated women into society remains a profound challenge, largely due to multidimensional stigma and structural violence. This qualitative study employs the theoretical frameworks of Stigma Theory and Structural Violence to examine how societal institutions perpetuate discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion. Using content analysis of secondary sources—including academic literature, policy reports, and case studies—the research explores the lived experiences of these women post-incarceration.The findings indicate that formerly incarcerated women face significant marginalization and social exclusion, primarily driven by the persistent stigma attached to their criminal records. This stigma functions as a form of structural violence, reinforced through the actions and attitudes of key societal institutions such as the family, law enforcement, local communities, and broader societal structures. Importantly, this form of discrimination is not the responsibility of any single entity but reflects a deeply embedded, multi-level social process that obstructs reintegration and perpetuates exclusion. Furthermore, the study highlights how systemic barriers—including institutional bias and societal rejection—severely hinder opportunities for rehabilitation and inclusion. Addressing the root causes of structural stigma and institutionalized discrimination is essential for fostering meaningful reintegration and enabling social acceptance of formerly incarcerated women.

Keywords: Mental Health, Stigma, Structural Violence, Post-Incarceration, Women, India

Introduction

In an era focused on inclusivity and reformative justice, however,for ex-prisoner women remain overlooked by institutions, policymakers, and society. Despitevulnerability, their challenges are overshadowed by broader concerns. Reintegration into society is among their greatest hurdles, marked by societal stigma, systemic discrimination, and limited resources (Bradley, 2017).

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Family and community rejection amplifies their isolation, while structural barrierssuch as discriminatory hiring and inadequate rehabilitation programsimpede their recovery. Psychological struggles, including trauma and depression, these challenges, perpetuating marginalization for ex-prisoner women (Rowe, 2011; Segrave & Carlton, 2010).Although prison reforms emphasize humane treatment during incarceration, post-release challenges for women are underexplored and often neglect gender-specific issues, such as balancing maternal roles with financial independence and addressing the stigma attached to women labeled as "criminals" (Schoenfeld, 2016).

Ex-prisoner women occupy a unique and vulnerable position in society due to their intersectional identities, which often combine socio-economic disadvantage, gender-based marginalization, and criminal stigma (McCausland, 2015; Loucks, 2010; Segrave & Carlton, 2010). Unlike men, women in the criminal justice system are often incarcerated for survival crimes, including theft, drug-related offenses, or crimes stemming from abusive relationships. Upon release, these women are not only labelled as criminals but also burdened by patriarchal norms that view them as failures in their roles as mothers, daughters, or caregivers (Bucerius& Sandberg, 2022; Campbell et al., 2001; Jeffries et al., 2020). This dual burden of gendered and criminal stigmatization makes reintegration into society an uphill battle.One of the most immediate challenges faced by ex-prisoner women is economic marginalization.In many cases, incarceration disrupts employment opportunities, leaving women without the skills or networks required to secure stable jobs. Employers are often unwilling to hire individuals with a criminal record, further restricting their access to financial independence (Moore, 1988).

This lack of economic stability perpetuates cycles of poverty and increases the likelihood of recidivism. Moreover, many ex-prisoner women are single mothers or primary caregivers, adding to the strain of meeting familial and societal expectations.Social ostracism and symbolic violence compound these economic challenges (Bozkurt, 2022). Communities often perceive ex-prisoner women as moral transgressors, leading to their exclusion from social networks and public life. Family estrangement is another common consequence, especially in traditional or conservative settings where a woman's honour is closely tied to her familial role. This alienation not only impacts their mental health but also diminishes their access to crucial support systems that could facilitate their reintegration (Covington, 2018).

The objective of this study is to critically examine existing literature to explore and theorize the experiences of ex-prisoner women through the lenses of stigma and structural violence. By analyzing these frameworks, the study aims to uncover how societal and institutional factors perpetuate the marginalization and exclusion of these women post-incarceration.This paper offers a comprehensive exploration of the socio-cultural challenges faced by ex-prisoner women in India, emphasizing the interplay between stigma, structural barriers, and reintegration difficulties. By employing a content analysis approach, it critically examines how societal perceptions, institutional discrimination, and systemic inequalities shape the post-incarceration experiences of these women. The study is based on two theoretical frameworks i.e., stigma and structural violence, the study provides a theoretical lens to understand the long-term marginalization that persists beyond their prison sentences. Through an analysis of secondary data sources, this research highlights the patterns of exclusion, employment barriers, mental health struggles, and familial alienation that define their reentry into society.

Ex-Prisoner Women, Reintegration, and Mental Health: A Critical Examine of Stigma and Structural Violence

The number of prison inmates is alarmingly increasing all over the world, the life inside the prison has not improved considerably and also, the concept of prison still remains anathema or even a taboo (Janetius& Govindarajan, 2017) and women continue to be one of the fastest growing groups of offenders with an increasing group of women involved in the criminal justice system around the world. Whilst internationally women comprise a low percentage of the total prison population, there is an escalating use of custody inextricably linked to the high levels of personal and social needs of women involved in the justice system (Sheehan & Trotter, 2017).The psychological impact of incarceration, combined with post-release challenges, further exacerbates the vulnerability of ex-prisoner women. Many suffer from mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which are often left untreated due to inadequate healthcare support (Lewis & Hayes, 1997). Incarceration often involves experiences of violence, abuse, or humiliation, leaving deep scars that hinder personal growth and adjustment. Life inside prison is stressful, with many psychological problems observed among prisoners. Regular episodes of suicide inside prisons substantiate the fact that prison life is traumatic and stressful (Janetius& Govindarajan, 2017).

Unfortunately, societal apathy and a lack of mental health resources mean that many ex-prisoner women struggle in silence.Prisoners often enter the system with pre-existing health problems, as a result of years of personal neglect and an inability or unwillingness to access health services (Moore, 1988). They generally have poorer health status than the general population, partly due to substance abuse and the concomitants of a criminal lifestyle, and partly because of the conditions of incarceration. Moreover, recently released ex-prisoners often lack the resources to move to a new neighbourhood, forcing them to return to the environments that contributed to their criminal behaviour (Leverentz, 2010).While both women and men offenders exhibit certain common traits, women's involvement in crime is shaped by unique factors. These factors frequently include extensive experiences of victimization and trauma, a high prevalence of mental health disorders, and significant substance abuse issues, all of which contribute to their distinct pathways into criminal behaviour (Sheehan & Trotter, 2017).

The legal system, designed more for retribution than rehabilitation, creates some of the most enduring roadblocks. Criminal records act as a permanent mark, making it nearly impossible for many women to secure stable jobs, rent housing, or access financial support. Even minor offenses carry disproportionate consequences, barring them from government schemes and community programs meant to assist vulnerable populations. Yet, the judicial system rarely acknowledges these extended forms of punishment—punishments that persist well beyond the prison sentence itself (Farmer, 2004; Vorobej, 2008).This permanent mark is known as "stigma." It is a social phenomenon where labeling, separation, and discrimination converge within a power structure that allows such treatment to occur (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001). For those who have been incarcerated, stigma plays a central role in the social inequalities they continue to face (Feingold, 2021). For women, the effects of stigma are particularly severe, manifesting as low self-esteem and a lack of respect from service providers (Flores & Pellico, 2011; Tiberi, 2007). As they re-enter society after serving time, these women encounter a series of barriers, one of the most daunting being the stigma surrounding their criminal history. This stigma not only affects their opportunities but also has a profound impact on their health and their ability to successfully reintegrate into the community (Brehmer et al., 2024).

To understand this phenomenon framework on stigma this denotes labelling or discrediting of individuals and exclude from social acceptance (Goffman, 1963; Jena & Acharya, 2024).Pryor and Reeder's (2011) provide a crucial lens through which to examine the systemic exclusion of ex-prisoner women in society citing four types such aspublic stigma, self-stigma, stigma by association, and structural stigma. The public stigma surrounding these women stems from deeply entrenched societal norms that equate incarceration with moral failure rather than systemic inequality (Corrigan et al., 2012). As a result, ex-prisoner women often face harsh societal judgment, social rejection, and diminished opportunities, reinforcing their outsider status. The stigma manifests in everyday interactions, from denied employment opportunities to the inability to secure housing, as individuals and institutions alike deem them untrustworthy.

Beyond external discrimination, many ex-prisoner women experience self-stigma, internalizing the negative societal labels imposed upon them. Repeated exposure to rejection, suspicion, and social exclusion leads to a decline in self-worth, pushing them toward self-imposed isolation or cycles of recidivism. The burden of self-stigma not only affects their psychological well-being but also hinders their reintegration, as they struggle to see themselves as deserving of a second chance (Brehmer et al., 2024).The effects of stigma are not confined to the individual—they extend to family members and close associates through stigma by association. Families of formerly incarcerated women often bear social shame, ostracization, or even economic repercussions, particularly in communities where honor and reputation are deeply valued. In many cases, families distance themselves to avoid the risk of being stigmatized, further weakening the social support systems necessary for successful reintegration (van der Sanden et al., 2013).

At the institutional level, structural stigma—interwoven with structural violence—perpetuates the exclusion of ex-prisoner women through policies, legal barriers, and economic restrictions. Employment discrimination, lack of access to rehabilitative healthcare, and bureaucratic obstacles in obtaining essential services create systematic barriers that push these women to the margins of society. Structural stigma, upheld by ideological and policy-driven stereotypes, ensures that ex-prisoner women remain permanently marked by their past, making reintegration not just difficult but often impossible (Hatzenbuehler & Link, 2014).

This structural violence provides a powerful lens to understand the systemic barriers that ex-prisoner women face in society. Unlike direct physical violence, structural violence is embedded within institutions, policies, and social norms, restricting opportunities, and reinforcing inequalities (Galtung, 1969). The operation of structural violence is complex and without having an "actor", it is difficult to eradicate from the society (Vorobej, 2008; Weigert, 2010). For ex-prisoner women, release from incarceration does not equate to freedom; rather, they enter a society that systematically denies them access to employment, healthcare, and social reintegration, ensuring that the weight of their past continues to define their future.For example, employment opportunities, remain a distant reality for most ex-prisoner women. The labor market functions as an enforcer of social exclusion, systematically rejecting individuals with criminal records, regardless of their skills or reformation. Employers, bound by rigid policies or personal biases, refuse to hire them, leaving them trapped in cycles of poverty, dependence, and social invisibility. Those who attempt to rebuild their lives often find themselves forced into exploitative labor, informal work, or even criminalized economies, not out of choice, but necessity (Ho, 2007).

Further,healthcare institutions deepen the structural neglect. Many women leave prison with untreated chronic illnesses, trauma, and mental health conditionsyet, on the outside, they encounter bureaucratic hurdles, medical discrimination, and an absence of reintegration-focused healthcare services (Colbert et al., 2013; Norris et al., 2022; Abbott et al., 2017). Their struggles with addiction, post-traumatic stress, or reproductive health concerns are rarely met with adequate support, as healthcare policies rarely account for the complexities of reintegration. The system, instead of facilitating recovery, often forces them to navigate an isolating and disjointed healthcare network, making essential medical care nearly unattainable (Barry, 2001; Agbaria et al., 2024).

Methods

This study is qualitative in nature and employs a content analysis approach to explore the socio-cultural conditions and challenges faced by ex-prisoner women in India. The research is based on an extensive review of secondary data, drawing from academic literature, policy documents, media reports, and case studies that examine the experiences of women who have served prison sentences for a variety of crimes, including homicide, theft, drug offenses, arms trafficking,

human trafficking, and fraud. Through this review, the study aims to understand the position of ex-prisoner women within India's socio-cultural dynamics, highlighting the challenges they face during reintegration into society.

To analyze these findings, the study integrates two theoretical frameworks as mentioned earlier: stigma theory and structural violence. The theory of stigma provides insight into how ex-prisoner women are socially labeled and stereotyped, examining the exclusion they face in familial, economic, and social spheres (Gofman, 1963). The concept of stigma is crucial in understanding how society constructs an identity for these women based on their past, often reducing them to their criminal records rather than recognizing their potential for rehabilitation. On the other hand, structural violence framework is used to analyze the systemic inequalities embedded in social structures (Galtung, 1969)—such as discriminatory hiring practices, lack of mental health support, and inadequate reintegration programs—that perpetuate their marginalization.

The study categorizes the experiences of ex-prisoner women based on the nature of their offenses, acknowledging how different crimes lead to varying degrees of social ostracization and stigma. By integrating these perspectives, the research provides a nuanced understanding of the intersection between individual experiences, structural inequalities, and cultural norms. Ultimately, this study sheds light on the barriers to reintegration faced by ex-prisoner women and offers insights into the broader implications for social justice, rehabilitation policies, and gender-sensitive legal frameworks in India.

Result

Socio-demography characteristic of women in India.

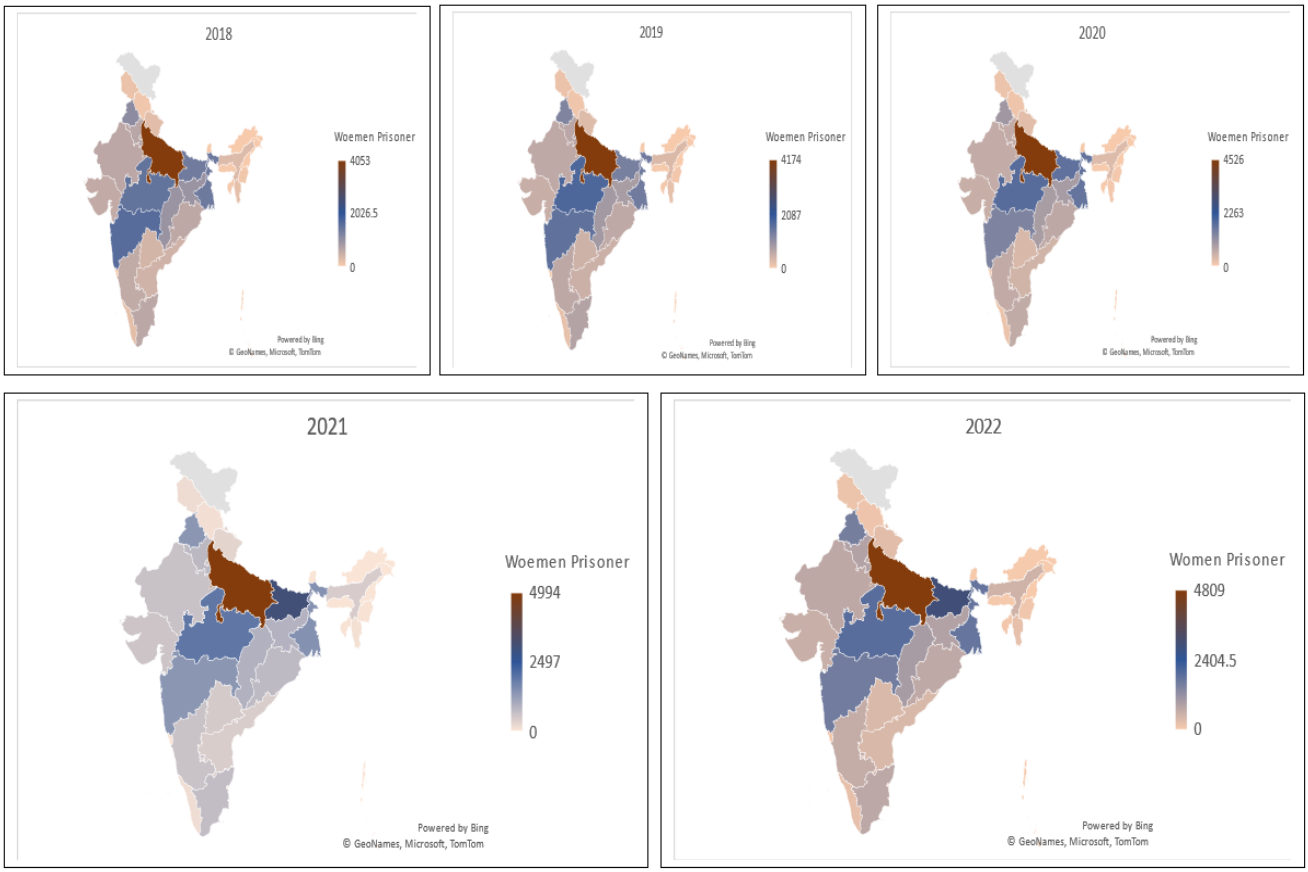


Figure 1: Maps from 2018 to 2022 as per NCRB, India report depicting the spatial distribution of women prisoners, including both convicted and undertrial inmates (detainees and other categories), across all states of India. Map designed in MS-Excel 2019.

The Institute of Crime and Justice Policy (2021) report highlights that over 740,000 women and girls are incarcerated worldwide, making up 6.9% of the global prison population. In India alone, the female prison population stood at 22,918 (Fair & Walmsley, 2021). According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) 2018 to 2022 report, the number of female inmates the year 2022, reached 23,772, this includes 5,412 convicted prisoners, 18,146 undertrials, 120 detainees, and 90 classified under other categories. The data over the past five years indicates fluctuations in the number of incarcerated women. In 2020, there were 4,713 convicted and 15,167 undertrial prisoners, while in 2021, these numbers increased to 4,990 convicted and 17,745 undertrials. A

further comparison with 2019 shows 6,179 convicted and 13,550 undertrials, whereas in 2018, the figures stood at 6,000 convicted and 13,072 undertrials. These trends reveal a growing number of undertrial women in prisons, pointing to delays in judicial proceedings and systemic issues in the criminal justice system.Although comprehensive data on released female inmates is unavailable, records indicate the number of women granted parole (early release before completing their sentence). In 2022, 856 women were released on parole, compared to 1,188 in 2021, 1,066 in 2020, 754 in 2019, and 1,043 in 2018.

Crime, Incarceration, and Stigmatisation

For many women, the path to incarceration is not a simple story of crime and punishment; it is a tangled web of victimization, survival, and systemic neglect. From childhood, many of these women experience deep-rooted violence such as physical, emotional, and sexualthat leaves lasting scars on their mental health. This early victimization often sets the stage for a lifetime of struggle, where mental illness and substance abuse become coping mechanisms, ultimately leading to repeated encounters with the criminal justice system (Lynch, 2017).Women's involvement in crime is often shaped by forces beyond their control. Some are coerced by violent partners, trapped in relationships where threats and financial manipulation push them into illegal activities (Jeffries et al., 2020). Others turn to crime out of sheer necessity, forced to navigate an economic landscape that offers them few legitimate options. By the time they enter prison, many of these women are already battling severe psychological trauma, addiction, and the weight of past abuse (Green et al., 2016).

But prison does not heal—it only reinforces the wounds. Women behind bars face an overwhelming prevalence of depression, PTSD, and substance dependence, especially those with histories of sexual violence (Karlsson & Zielinski, 2020). Even after release, the struggle does not end. Society does not easily forgive, and the label of "criminal" follows them wherever they go. Job applications, housing, even relationships become hurdles too high to cross. Though some seek treatment, many find that their past still dictates their present, as existing rehabilitation programs fail to provide lasting solutions (Jordan et al., 2002).

Beyond economic and familial concerns, women during post- incarceration frequently experience significant mental and physical health challenges. The prison environment often exacerbates preexisting mental health conditions, and upon release, many individuals struggle to

access adequate healthcare services. Conditions such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are common among former prisoners, yet the lack of accessible mental health care further compounds their struggles. Women, in particular, face unique health challenges related to reproductive health, substance abuse, and trauma from experiences of sexual or physical violence, both before and during incarceration. Inadequate healthcare access can also extend to physical health issues, with parolees facing heightened risks of chronic illnesses and substance abuse disorders.

Society, Stigma, and Impact of structural violence on Ex-Prisoner Women

Women, most of who will eventually be released from prison, might return to their families and communities with even more complex mental health needs (Harner, 2013). Most individuals who have been released from incarceration find themselves placed under a system that provides minimal rehabilitative services and imposes stringent conditions, making successful reintegration into society exceedingly difficult (Thompson, 2008). The contemporary corrections environment is shaped by a complex interplay of policies, ranging from indeterminate and determinate sentencing frameworks to various degrees of investment in prisoner reentry programs. While these policies are designed to facilitate the transition from incarceration to society, they often fail to address the broader societal and individual challenges, particularly women, encounter (Opsal & Foley, 2013).

Moreover, one of the most pressing concerns surrounding reintegration and reentry is the array of collateral consequences that emerge as formerly incarcerated individuals cycle in and out of prison, their families, and their communities. This revolving door effect not only affects the individual parolee but also has far-reaching implications for community cohesion and social stability. The constant movement of parolees back and forth between correctional institutions and their home communities can erode trust, disrupt social networks, and contribute to overall social disorganization, making it difficult for neighborhoods to establish stability and safety (Petersilia, 2001). For women, these disruptions are even more pronounced, as they are more likely to serve as primary caregivers and are often released into environments where they must assume immediate responsibility for children and dependents despite inadequate support systems (Ng et al., 2021; Wilson & Koons-Witt, 2021).

Moreover, the economic well-being of both ex-prisoner woman and their families is often severely impacted. Many employers are hesitant to hire individuals with a criminal record, and the stigma associated with incarceration can limit access to stable employment opportunities, leaving them economically vulnerable. This lack of financial stability, in turn, places additional strain on families, many of whom already face economic hardships (Niyogi, 2022). For formerly incarcerated women, these challenges are compounded by gender-based employment discrimination, a lack of vocational training tailored to women, and the necessity of balancing work with caregiving responsibilities. Additionally, the economic precarity of women increases their likelihood of recidivism, as financial desperation may lead them to engage in illegal activities as a means of survival (Sangoi&Goshin, 2013).

Family dynamics are also significantly affected, as the presence of a parolee can introduce new stressors and challenges. Many families struggle to provide emotional and financial support to their loved ones returning from prison, particularly when resources and assistance are scarce. Further, children of incarcerated individuals may experience emotional distress, educational setbacks, and disruptions in their daily lives, further perpetuating cycles of instability and disadvantage. Women, in particular, face difficulties in reestablishing parental rights and relationships, as they may have been separated from their children for extended periods. The intersection of gender, incarceration, and family responsibilities necessitates reentry programs that specifically address parenting, trauma recovery, and economic independence for women (Arditti, 2006; López-Garza, 2015; Stansfield, 2022; McKay, 2016).

Additionally, political alienation remains a critical issue for incarcerated individuals. Many states impose restrictions on voting rights of women who are under trail, effectively marginalizing them from the democratic process and reinforcing their social exclusion. The inability to participate in civic life contributes to feelings of disenfranchisement and a lack of belonging, which can hinder successful reintegration efforts (Martinez, 2004). For this reason, women, who are often underrepresented in discussions of incarceration and reentry policy, face additional barriers in accessing political advocacy and legal support, further limiting their capacity to influence systemic reforms that affect them directly.

Housing insecurity is another major barrier to successful reintegration. Many parolees find themselves with few housing options upon release, as restrictions on public housing,

employment discrimination, and financial instability create significant obstacles to securing stable accommodation. Women are disproportionately affected by these issues, as they are more likely to experience homelessness upon release due to a lack of gender-specific reentry housing programs and the additional burden of finding child-friendly accommodations. Without safe and consistent housing, the likelihood of recidivism increases, as homelessness and unstable living conditions contribute to a greater risk of reoffending.

Discussion

The struggles of ex-prisoner women extend far beyond the prison walls, yet their challenges remain largely overlooked in both policy and academic discussions. Reintegration into society is not just a matter of personal willpower; it requires a comprehensive approach that addresses rehabilitation, mental health support, and community sensitization. Without targeted interventions, these women continue to be defined by their past, forced to navigate a world that views them with suspicion and reluctance. Gender-sensitive reentry programs, combined with public awareness campaigns, are crucial in dismantling the cycles of stigma and exclusion that keep them on society's fringes. Historically, criminal justice reforms and rehabilitation models have been shaped by male-centric experiences, neglecting the specific struggles that women face post-incarceration (Covington, 2018).

Even within their own families and communities, ex-prisoner women often face deep-seated stigma and moral judgment. Families may refuse to take them back, fearing dishonor, while communities view them as permanently tainted by their past crimes. For some, religious and cultural beliefs dictate harsh moral consequences, further isolating them from social networks and economic support systems. Without familial acceptance or community ties, the burden of survival becomes even more overwhelming, leading many to relapse into cycles of crime, destitution, or self-imposed isolation (Ortiz & Jackey, 2019).

These ex-prisoner women encounter a complex and multidimensional array of stigma, which varies significantly depending on their personal backgrounds and circumstances. For instance, women from lower caste communities, particularly in a religious context, experience not only the stigma of their criminal past but also social ostracization and marginalization due to their caste identity (Cherukuri et al., 2009). This discrimination could be compounded by the practices of untouchability, which continue to persist in certain parts of Indian society(Sarukkai, 2009).

Additionally, if these women are pregnant or have young children, the stigma extends beyond the individual and affects their families. Both mothers and children often face severe social exclusion, with the mother subjected to judgment and the child potentially experiencing discrimination in educational settings, community spaces, and beyond (Flores & Pellico, 2011).

For women from tribal communities, the challenges are equally harsh. Their history of marginalization often intersects with their criminal background, leading to increased isolation and social ostracism. In these cases, the stigma can be even more pronounced, as tribal women are often already marginalized based on their ethnic identity (Brown et al., 2021; Gupta, 2007). As a result, they may be doubly penalizedonce for their past actions and again for their marginalized social status. This intersection of caste, ethnicity, gender, and criminal history creates a web of discrimination that is difficult to escape.

In all of these contexts, ex-prisoner women face a multidimensional stigma that affects various aspects of their lives—social, economic, political, and cultural. The stigmatization they endure is not simply a reflection of their past criminal acts but is deeply tied to societal structures of inequality, oppression, and discrimination. Each layer of stigma adds a new barrier to their reintegration into society, perpetuating their marginalization and hindering their ability to rebuild their lives.

One of the most pressing challenges is the complex intersection of mental health and behavioural disorders. These conditions, often exacerbated by past trauma, manifest in diverse ways—through emotional distress, dysfunctional relationships, and self-destructive behaviours. The long-standing divide between biological and psychosocial approaches to mental health has further complicated the understanding of these disorders, leaving many ex-prisoner women without adequate psychological support (Audi et al., 2018). When combined with the stress of reintegration, untreated mental health conditions can lead to social withdrawal, unemployment, and even recidivism. Instead of receiving the care they need, these women are often met with indifference, their struggles dismissed as personal failings rather than systemic failures.

Beyond these internal battles, ex-prisoner women must contend with the invisible yet powerful force of stigma. Society does not merely reject them; it brands them with an identity that is nearly impossible to shed. The institutions designed to facilitate reintegration, employment agencies, housing authorities, and even social servicesoften act as barriers rather than bridges.

Stigma operates not just at a social level but also within structural policies that restrict their access to jobs, housing, and financial assistance. As Goffman (1963) explains, stigma is not only about public perception but also about the institutional mechanisms that perpetuate exclusion. For ex-prisoner women, stigma is not just an abstract concept; it is embedded in the rules that deny them employment, in the landlords who refuse them shelter, and in the communities that refuse to see them as anything other than criminals. Their struggles are not just about crime and punishment but about survival, resilience, and the silent battles they continue to fight long after their release.

On the other hand, the Indian government's recognition of the need for aftercare services in its national prison policy, the reality remains grim. While rehabilitation programs exist on paper, in practice, many ex-prisoner women are left to navigate reintegration alone. Labelling and social stigma create barriers that no policy alone can dismantle (Varghese & Raghavan, 2019). Released women face immense psychological, social, and economic hurdles that make re-entering society a formidable task. Without strong institutional support, they struggle to find employment, secure housing, and access mental health care, leading to isolation and, in some cases, reoffending. The failure to provide sustained aftercare not only undermines their rehabilitation but also reinforces a cycle of marginalization that is difficult to escape (Richie, 2001; Grace, 2022).

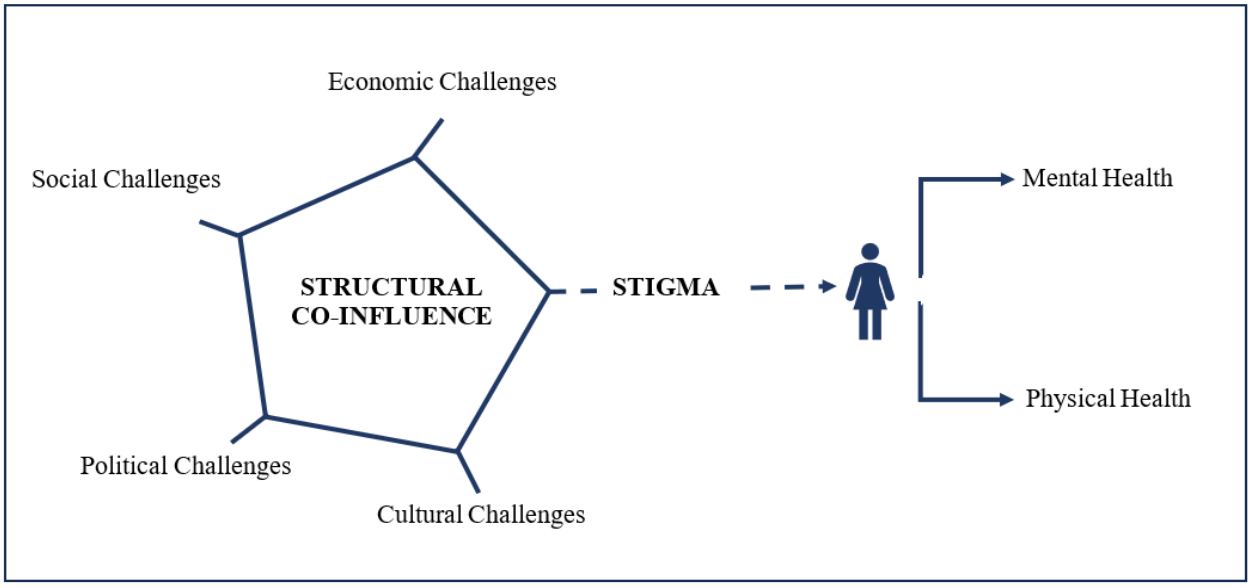


Figure 2: Structural violence that affecting during the post incarceration woman within a society.

As per figure 2, for ex-prisoner women, reintegration into society is not just about leaving prison; it is about navigating a world that often refuses to accept them. Economically, they find themselves trapped in a cycle of financial instability, with limited employment opportunities and workplace discrimination. Many employers hesitate to hire individuals with a criminal record, particularly women, fearing potential risks or reputational damage. This economic exclusion makes it difficult for them to achieve financial independence, forcing some into precarious or exploitative jobs, while others, without any means of survival, may even resort to illegal activities once again. Adding to their hardship is the lack of financial support from institutions, as many ex-prisoners are ineligible for government aid or credit. Without the ability to secure stable employment, housing, or even access vocational training, these women find themselves stuck in a continuous struggle to rebuild their lives.

Beyond economic barriers, social stigma becomes powerful force of exclusion. Society often views ex-prisoner women as permanently tainted by their past, making reintegration an isolating experience. Many women return to communities that label them as criminals, leading to rejection from neighbors, friends, and even their own families. The absence of a supportive social network intensifies their vulnerability, leaving them without emotional or material support in times of crisis. Even basic services such as housing, healthcare, and banking become difficult to access due to discriminatory policies that limit services for individuals with a criminal history. In many cases, these women are denied rental agreements or forced to live in low-income, unsafe neighborhoods where their chances of rehabilitation decrease. This deep-rooted social rejection reinforces their marginalization, making them feel as though they are forever defined by their past mistakes.

Politically, their struggles extend beyond mere exclusion from policies; in many places, ex-prisoners, especially women, are stripped of their voting rights, further distancing them from civic participation. The loss of political agency means they have little say in the policies that govern their reintegration, leaving them dependent on a system that often fails to address their needs. Additionally, the legal system, which should ideally facilitate their transition, frequently becomes another roadblock. Many ex-prisoners find it difficult to obtain identity documents or access legal aid, which prevents them from securing jobs, housing, and even basic social welfare. The absence of strong policy support for the rehabilitation of female ex-prisoners leaves them in a vulnerable position, with no clear path toward reintegration. Without structured reintegration

programs that offer vocational training, psychological support, and legal assistance, they are left to fend for themselves in a society that remains unwelcoming.

Culturally, ex-prisoner women face an even harsher judgment than their male counterparts. In many societies, a woman's virtue and morality are deeply tied to her reputation, and incarceration is seen as an irreversible stain on her character. This gendered stigma is particularly strong in conservative communities where women are expected to uphold family honor. Unlike men, who may have an easier time reintegrating into professional and social spheres, women are often labeled as outcasts, unfit for marriage or respectable work. Participation in community and religious events becomes difficult, as they are subtly—or overtly—excluded from traditional roles. The perception that they have defied cultural norms by engaging in criminal activity, regardless of the circumstances that led to their incarceration, makes it even harder for them to reclaim their place in society.

Perhaps the most devastating impact is felt within their families. Many incarcerated women lose custody of their children, and regaining parental rights is a long and complicated process. Courts and child welfare agencies often hesitate to return children to mothers with criminal records, assuming that they are unfit parents. Even when women do regain custody, rebuilding relationships with children who have spent years apart from them is not easy. The emotional distance, coupled with the societal judgment that deems them unworthy mothers, creates further emotional distress. Marriages and romantic relationships also suffer, as many husbands and partners abandon incarcerated women, seeing them as burdens rather than individuals in need of support. Even parental and sibling relationships become strained, with families either disowning them or treating them with suspicion. The home, which should ideally be a space of safety and belonging, often becomes yet another site of rejection.

For ex-prisoner women, the transition from incarceration to freedom is fraught with obstacles at every level—economic, social, political, and cultural. Which is part of the structural violence. While they may have served their time, society continues to punish them long after they have left prison. Without meaningful rehabilitation programs, legal protections, and societal acceptance, many of these women remain trapped in a cycle of violence that amplify the marginalization, unable to fully reintegrate and rebuild their lives.

Reintegration should not be seen as an individual burden but as a collective responsibility. If society continues to define ex-prisoner women by their past crimes rather than their potential for change, the path to rehabilitation will remain obstructed. Addressing their struggles requires more than passive acknowledgment; it demands active measures to create policies that prioritize their reintegration, mental well-being, and economic inclusion. Breaking the chains of stigma and structural violence means recognizing that these women are not just former offenders—they are survivors, mothers, daughters, and individuals striving for a second chance in a world that has long turned its back on them.The challenge is not just about offering them a second chance; it is about dismantling the structural barriers that keep them from moving forward.

Conclusion

As we found out women post-incarceration experience considerable marginalization, oppression, and discrimination, largely due to the stigma attached to their criminal histories. This stigma is a form of structural violence, institutionalised by various societal actors—ranging from family members and law enforcement to neighbours and broader community stakeholders. It is not solely the responsibility of one group but rather an institutionalized process that operates at multiple levels of society, hindering these women's reintegration and continued marginalization.

Addressing these systemic issues requires a comprehensive approach that includes policy reform, increased investment in reentry support programs, and a shift toward a more rehabilitative, rather than punitive, model of justice. Gender-responsive policies that specifically cater to the needs of formerly incarcerated women are essential to ensuring that they have access to the resources necessary to rebuild their lives and reintegrate into society successfully.

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