



Woman in Development and Politics

The Lived Experience of Incarcerated Women in Yazd: Confronting Stigma, Isolation, and Social Reintegration Challenges

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
<p>Article type: Research Article</p> <p>Article history: Received: 24 March 2025 Received in revised form: 8 June 2025 Accepted: 29 June 2025 Published online: 23 July 2025</p> <p>Keywords: <i>Structural Deviation, Women, Incarceration, Crime, Individual and Social Problems.</i></p>	<p>Introduction There has been a substantial change in the way criminologists, sociologists, and policymakers conceptualize female criminality as a result of the growing incarceration of women worldwide. Although women account for less than 15% of the global incarcerated population, the number of female prisoners has increased by over 50% since 2000, compared to males. This phenomenon is especially concerning in contexts where traditional gender norms and familial expectations dominate, and where women's deviation from prescribed social roles is met with heightened social sanctions. The consequences of imprisonment for women are frequently not limited to legal penalties; they also include moral condemnation, social exclusion, identity erosion, and the disruption of essential roles, such as motherhood and caregiving.</p> <p>This study focuses on the lived experiences of incarcerated women in Yazd, a culturally devout city located in central Iran. In these circumstances, the imprisonment of women is not merely a legal matter; it is a significant breach of social norms that results in more profound forms of stigma and exclusion. The study endeavors to investigate the processes by which these women become involved in criminal activity, the structural and affective forces that perpetuate their criminal behavior, and the strategies they employ to survive and make sense of their experiences using a grounded theory approach. The study endeavors to reconcile the discrepancy between the theoretical framework and the actual perspectives of women who have been incarcerated.</p> <p>Methodology The research employed a qualitative method based on the systematic grounded theory framework proposed by Strauss and Corbin. The study was conducted in the female infirmary of the central prison in Yazd. The selection of twenty-one women inmates was based on purposive and theoretical sampling, which ensured a diverse range of characteristics, including age (ranging from 19 to 65), educational background, marital status, number of children, and the type of crime committed (primarily drug-related offenses, document forgery, and financial fraud).</p> <p>The data was collected through semi-structured and in-depth interviews that were conducted on the penitentiary premises. Audio recordings were prohibited due to security regulations. Rather, the researcher conducted interviews in real-time and subsequently expanded them into comprehensive texts. The interview questions were intended to elicit profound reflection on the causes of crime, personal coping mechanisms, emotional and social consequences, and life before and after incarceration.</p> <p>The three-step coding procedure that is typical of grounded theory was implemented during data analysis:</p> <p>Open coding – breaking down raw data into discrete concepts and categories; Axial coding – identifying relationships among categories and subcategories; Selective coding – developing a core category that integrates all themes.</p>

Three validation techniques were implemented to guarantee the reliability of the data: (1) participant validation through feedback on interview summaries; (2) comparison of emergent codes with raw transcripts to confirm consistency; and (3) peer review of coding with a research colleague to guarantee intercoder reliability.

The research adhered to rigorous ethical standards, including the right to withdraw at any moment, the use of pseudonyms to ensure anonymity, and the acquisition of informed consent from all participants. The interviews were conducted in a secluded area of the prison, and special measures were implemented to establish a nonjudgmental and respectful atmosphere.

Results

The concept of “living in the cycle of structural deviance” was the fundamental phenomenon that emerged from the analysis. The women were subjected to a recurring pattern of criminalization, marginalization, and exclusion both before and after incarceration. Their narratives demonstrated a multifaceted interplay of contextual, causal, and intervening factors:

Causal factors included exposure to deviant subcultures, growing up in criminalized families, and experiencing emotional crises such as domestic violence, childhood neglect, or betrayal by partners. Many of the women were coerced or manipulated into illegal activities by male relatives or companions, and they had limited or no control over their life choices.

Contextual factors included emotional vulnerability, impulsive decision-making, and a dearth of education or skills. Frequently, women reported committing crimes, such as drug transportation or assuming legal responsibility to protect a loved one, which are rooted in emotional entanglement rather than criminal intent.

Economic hardship, social stigma, gender-based educational deprivation, and cultural restrictions were among the intervening conditions. The exclusion of women from legal economic opportunities was collectively reinforced by these factors, which compelled them to resort to survival-based illegality.

Three primary categories were employed to elucidate the repercussions of these experiences:

Defensive isolation – a conscious decision to retreat from social interactions to avoid humiliation, gossip, and stigma.

Psychological erosion – chronic mental health problems including depression, anxiety, hopelessness, and self-harm tendencies.

Suspended identity – the feeling of being suspended between one's former self and the socially rejected designation of “ex-convict.” Even from their family members, numerous women concealed their imprisonment.

The women implemented a series of survival strategies that enabled them to endure:

Identity reconstruction: Identity reconstruction: the process of redefining oneself through behavioral change, community engagement, or reframing of personal narratives.

Spiritual renewal: the practice of religious rituals, prayer, and faith in divine justice as a means of achieving psychological equilibrium.

Emotional purification: using crying, storytelling, and expressions of pain to release internal tensions, often in group or therapeutic settings within the prison.

This resulted in a paradigmatic model that illustrates the production and reproduction of structural deviance in the lives of marginalized women. The model demonstrates that crime is not a straightforward act of an individual, but rather the result of a complex interplay of trauma and disadvantage, which is further exacerbated by punitive social responses.

Conclusion

This research highlights that female criminality, particularly in conservative contexts such as Yazd, is most effectively comprehended as a socially constructed consequence of systemic exclusion, emotional deprivation, and structural inequality. The results are consistent with well-established theories:

Hirschi's Social Bond Theory elucidates the women's lack of attachment to traditional social institutions like school or family.

Cloward and Ohlin's Differential Opportunity Theory demonstrates how individuals are compelled to pursue illegitimate alternatives due to their inability to access legitimate means of advancement.

Goffman's Stigma Theory elucidates how the act of being labeled a criminal exacerbates exclusion and impedes reintegration into the broader social community.

This study is a valuable addition to the global literature that depicts incarcerated women

as victims of intersecting vulnerabilities, including poverty, gender oppression, fractured families, and systemic neglect, rather than as criminals. The participants' experiences are consistent with those of Bright et al. (2023), Bucerius & Sandberg (2022), Parry (2021), and Gueta & Chen (2016), in that they illustrate how crime becomes an almost ineluctable means of survival when no other alternatives are available.

To address these issues, the study recommends:

Creating holistic rehabilitation programs focused on trauma recovery, parenting, vocational skills, and emotional health;

Promoting community-based alternatives to incarceration for non-violent female offenders;

Supporting post-release reentry services including housing, job placement, and legal aid;

Implementing anti-stigma public education campaigns to enable social reintegration;

Reforming sentencing laws to incorporate restorative justice principles and gender sensitivity.

Ultimately, the lived experiences of incarcerated women in Yazd suggest a more extensive necessity for structural transformation in the manner in which societies address female deviance. Rather than punitive exclusion, the emphasis should be on restorative inclusion, which will allow these women to reconstruct their lives with dignity and autonomy.

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