REINTEGRATION EXPERIENCES OF FEMALE EX-CONVICTS OF ADIALA JAIL: A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

By

Zainab Fatima

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Supervisor

Dr. Fida Muhammad Khan

MPhil Development Studies

PIDE School of Policy Development Governance

Pakistan Institute of Development Economics,

Islamabad (2025)

PIDE
PAKISTAN INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPMENT ECONOMICS

Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, Islamabad

PIDE School of Policy, Development & Governance

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Supervisor: Dr. Fida Muhammad Khan Signature: _____

External Examiner: Dr. Saadia Abid Signature: _____

Director,
PIDE School of Policy,
Development & Governance Dr. Hafsa Hina Signature: _____

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I ___**Zainab Fatima**_____ hereby state that my MPhil thesis titled __Reintegration Experiences of Female Ex-Convicts of Adiala Jail: A Narrative Analysis___ is my own work and has not been submitted previously by me for taking any degree from Pakistan Institute of Development Economics or anywhere else in the Country/world.

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Signature of Student

Zainab Fatima

Name of Student

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ABSTRACT

The title of 'ex-convict' is given to people when they complete their sentences in prison and reintegrate into society. Prison changes individuals; its impact lasts throughout their lives. The experience differs for men and women. Women are already marginalized, facing multiple layers of exclusion due to their gender and societal norms, resulting in a different prison experience compared to their male counterparts. Academic research suggests that not only are women's pathways to crime different, but they also tend to be involved in less violent offences (Gender Pathways Theory, Life Course Theory, and Feminist Criminology). The causes of crime, their effects, and how women navigate the criminal justice system are vastly different experiences. This study employs Labelling Theory, Gendered Pathways Theory, and Feminist Criminology as lenses to examine the experiences of women who have been previously incarcerated. It finds that women are not always intentionally involved in crime; circumstances such as poverty, intimate partners, blind trust in close relations, lack of awareness of legal procedures, or limited education make them vulnerable, leading to manipulation or exploitation by third parties. Additionally, gender-based traumas like domestic or sexual violence, harassment, or self-defense often drive them towards criminal acts. The focus of the study is on their lived experiences across three stages: prior to offending, during imprisonment, and after release. The narratives, analyzed thematically, reveal that most women never wished to commit crimes; they were often caught due to their circumstances. They highlighted gaps within the criminal justice system, misconduct by police and prison staff, challenges faced in prison, the lack of effective rehabilitation programs, and insufficient support post-release. The stigma of being labelled a woman who has offended is compounded when they are branded as convicted women. The label 'ex-convict' persistently follows them, subjecting them to ongoing social punishment. The study offers key policy recommendations, such as prioritizing financial aid and temporary shelter, increasing legal awareness among both men and women at a young age, establishing organized support structures for ex-convicts, and re-evaluating our criminal justice system.

Keywords: Reintegration, female ex-convicts, imprisonment and post-release challenges, social stigma, recidivism, social and economic reintegration, family relationships, employment opportunities, gendered experiences, prison system, identity reconstruction, support networks (community, NGOs, government), social exclusion, narratives or lived experiences, psychological impact, resilience and coping strategies.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Ex-convict is a term used for a person who has been charged with a crime, and has spent the prescribed time in prison as a consequence for his/her crime, with or without punishment in incarceration, released from the prison, and is not under any surveillance by law-making authorities (Tariq, 2020). The very label 'ex-convict' carries with it a stigma; it serves as an identifier that one is not as worthy as others. This label leads to making it exceedingly challenging for ex-convicts to become full members of society (Becker, 2018). This labelling excludes the person who has once passed the doors of a prison, resulting in isolation and rejection, not just from society but also from close friends and family members (Baldry & Maplestone, 2003; Muthee, 2020). Life of ex-convicts is filled with daunting obstacles; they face hurdles for reintegration into the society, they overcome unanticipated situations like rejection from closed ones, lack of support and stability, lack of finances and most of the time their property gets stolen as they get no time to save it before incarceration, and struggle of starting from the scratch with the label of 'criminal' attached with them. A life filled with the pursuit of redemption and a fair second chance struggles to rebuild life with the burden of past transgression (Forte, 2023; Muthee, 2020; Tariq, 2020).

Convicts could be men or women, but the experiences of both vary due to the gender norms attached to their identities. Women, children, and other minority groups are already marginalized strata of our society, and face challenges differently compared to their male counterparts (Nigam, 2014). The societal structures that lead to inequalities and exclusion at multiple levels make women marginalized as a group in our society. As a disenfranchised group, women deal with structural issues stemming from long-standing patriarchal structures and gender inequality (Sultana, 2010). Although they comprise half of the world's population, women often face obstacles in areas such as healthcare, education, employment, and political representation (Sen, 2019). Usually, women are disproportionately affected by social exclusion, abuse, and discrimination, which feeds the cycle of marginalization (Sultana, 2010). From the moment a woman is born, her marginalization starts with the label of 'female,' and based on that label, she is expected to follow the path already decided by the society, for example her character is associated with her 'good' conduct already prescribed by the society and following the norms, if she follows those, she lives an average life filled with inequality and marginalization(Crenshaw, 1991; Nigam, 2014). The phenomenon

of intersectionality exacerbates existing disadvantages by subjecting women from marginalized racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds to several forms of discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991).

Most of the women are treated as less human or second-class citizens due to the marginalization resulting from the different 'labels' attached to them, and face difficulties in making their life decisions and strive to live like free humans. It could be said that women live in the panopticon[1] of society (Becker, 2018; Sultana, 2011). Society punishes them in many ways for labels they did not even make or choose for themselves, such as those of their gendered identity, the class they are born to, and other ascriptions (Becker, 2018; Nigam, 2014). Those women who are already living in this panopticon, if they deviate from these societal norms or commit any crime for any reason, the title of 'criminal' or 'ex-convict,' when added, multiplies the oppression in their lives, especially when it intersects with different aspects of their identities (Crenshaw, 1991; Forte, 2023). Life experiences of female ex-convicts are unique and different from their male counterparts. It therefore serves as a critical issue of scientific inquiry to consider how the added label of ex-convicts makes the lives of women more challenging.

This research aims to understand the specific challenges faced by women, investigating the post-incarceration lived experiences of female ex-convicts, previously incarcerated in the Central Jail of Rawalpindi, also known as Adiala Jail, and will identify the mechanisms that can help support the process of their reintegration. Due to limited research conducted on the lives of female ex-convicts in Pakistan, there is scarcity of data available on the lives of female ex-convicts, through a detailed narrative analysis of their lived experiences, this research aims to contribute to the post-incarceration reintegration academic discourse by addressing their struggles in facing stigma, lack of support and employment opportunities and societal behaviors with them, and will find the areas of interventions. The research findings will also contribute towards informing policy development, identifying a foundation for tailored programs that can address the needs of female ex-convicts of Pakistan more effectively.

[1] The term 'Panopticon' is derived from Greek roots: 'pan' meaning 'all' or 'entire,' and 'opticon' meaning to see or to observe. Therefore, the literal meaning of Panopticon is all-seeing or all-observing. The concept of the panopticon was given was Jeremy Bentham in the 18th century, where he explained the panopticon as a building where a guard can keep an eye on every inmate. Later, this concept was developed by Foucault as a metaphor for modern disciplinary societies, creating an argument that the concept of surveillance is not just confined to prisons, but it has been extended into our societies, like in schools, offices, and even public places (Foucault, 1997).

1.2. Statement of Problem

Research shows that when women come out of prison, they face several challenges that start from social stigmatization, economic instability, and, in most cases, a lack of support from their immediate family members. They face discrimination, stigma, and isolation, which result in difficulties in getting an education, a house to live in, and even in conducting daily life tasks. Moreover, the criminal record attached to them for a lifetime proves to be a big hurdle to earning even a simple living, resulting in a lack of job opportunities. This lack of support from society and government leaves them with no other options but to live a life filled with traumas or to get involved in another crime, resulting in an increased rate of recidivism. In Pakistan, research has focused more on issues of women inside prisons or focused more on 'ex-convicts' issues in general, leaving a gap in study for what kind of specific difficulties women face after incarceration and what kind of support they get from society and government, and if not, what do they want from society and government. Furthermore, it is important to explore the impact of vocational training and rehabilitation programs given to women in prisons and their impacts on their lives once they leave prison.

1.3. Research Problem

Based on the problems stated above, this research will be based on the life stories of female ex-convicts in Pakistan, especially in the Central Jail of Rawalpindi, also known as Adiala Jail. This research problem has been narrowed down to "Reintegration Experiences of Female Ex-convicts of Adiala Jail: A Narrative Analysis*."*

1.4. Research Objectives:

This research is focused on the following objectives:

1. To analyze the life conditions of the female ex-convicts from their own perspectives.
2. To inquire into the relationship between the nature of crime committed by women ex-convicts and the marginalization that resulted in their lives after incarceration.
3. To analyze the specific challenges faced by female ex-convicts during and after incarceration.
4. To discover what role the Prison System and its environment play in the lives of ex-convicts in Pakistan.

5. To explore what options were practically available for ex-convicts during their prison era in terms of rehabilitation programs and how effective those programs were for their reintegration into society.

1.5. Research Questions:

The following are the research questions based on the research objectives:

1. What living conditions are faced by female ex-convicts, and what were the impacts of being imprisoned on their lives after their release? What specific challenges did they face after being released from prison?
2. What type of crimes were the respondents involved in, and how did the nature of the crime committed impact their lives during and after incarceration?
3. What are the specific challenges faced by women during incarceration?
4. What is the role of the prison system and its environment in reshaping the lives of female prisoners, and how does it affect them after their reintegration into society?
5. What rehabilitation options were available to women in prison, and how well do they respond to the needs of female ex-convicts?

Chapter 2

2.1.1. Review of Literature

This review of literature presents a scholarly basis to the reader to bring to light why there is a dire need for a descriptive study on the lives of female ex-convicts in Pakistan. It sheds light on global advancements aimed at improving the reintegration process for female ex-convicts. It presents a theoretical framework for reference on what coping mechanisms are being used by female ex-convicts in other parts of the world, and what their governments are doing and can do in the future to improve their lives, and how they can reduce the female crime rate and recidivism by using gender specific strategies and policies to address their specific needs.

After prison, the path of an ex-convict's life is decided by his/her circumstances, which may lead them to repentance or recidivism. Gender-based needs are not only different for male and female prisons but also for different prisons in different areas based on their culture and individual needs. It is backed by research that women's pathways into and out of crime are totally different from their male counterparts (Muthee, 2020). Muthee explains in her paper that Wahidin (2013) suggests women in general are non-criminal and conformist, with lower crime rates than men. However, crime reports show increasing numbers of women in the penal system for both violent and property crimes, often under coercion or necessity. Women commonly commit property crimes like forgery and fraud, and in cases of serious offences like murder, kidnapping, or drug use and abuse, it has been seen that these crimes are committed with the support or involvement of intimate male partners (Muthee, 2020). In Pakistan, statistics show that women are usually imprisoned for theft, drug trafficking, aiding criminals, and violent crimes like murder and assault (Baloch, 2011; Justice Project Pakistan, 2023)

Examining the lives of female ex-convicts reveals a complex narrative of resilience, resourcefulness, and strength in the face of adversity (Brand, 2016). Upon release, these women face a complex environment filled with societal expectations, legal restrictions, and personal goals (Beichner & Hagemann, 2022). The reintegration process becomes more difficult by the challenges of single motherhood, economic instability, and past trauma and abuse (Booth, 2021). The lack of gender-specific support systems and rehabilitative services further intensify the difficulties these women face, leading to ongoing cycles of recidivism and social marginalization (Tariq, 2020). The intersection of race, class, and gender amplifies

these disparities, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive reentry approaches that address the unique needs and vulnerabilities of women (Trahan, 2010).

The reintegration of female ex-convicts into society is a complex issue, particularly in countries where the social stigma of incarceration is profound (Hlavka et al., 2015). For example in West Bengal, India, female ex-convicts face challenges like finding an employment, rebuilding relationships and an intense stigma from society being a women and an ex-convict, often makes their lives miserable as at the first place they find it hard to get a job with a criminal record, and if they get one they are more prone to exploitation and stigmatization leading them towards isolation and lack of respect from society (Niyogi, 2022). In Bangladesh, women are bound to survive with discrimination, exploitation, labelling, and a lack of employment. The lack of rejection from society is so intense that when women were interviewed inside the prison, the worst thing that came out was that they didn't want to come out of prison (Akhter, 2014). The situation in Pakistan is not so different; the lack of post-release reintegration support and the challenging prison environment compound the difficulties faced by women after their release (Bagri, 2010). This literature review aims to explore the experiences of female ex-convicts, the shortcomings of the prison system, and the impact of rehabilitation programs, drawing parallels from international studies where relevant data is more readily available (Afzal, 2023).

2.1.2. Reintegration into Society

Mandela Rules clearly State that women should feel protected in prisons, safe from sexual, physical, and even verbal violence (UNODC, 2015). However, the reality is far more complex in Pakistan, as police torture of prisoners is a common practice (Justice Project Pakistan & OMCT, 2021). When individuals are considered submissive, they are often not treated with the same humanity as those who are free (Khan et al., 2023). Incidents of State negligence towards its prisoners reported at Bagram Jail are an example of a lack of the State's consideration towards prisoners (Justice Project Pakistan, 2019). This abusive behavior of police is not just confined to prisons, but it's reported in Faisalabad that police are involved in harassing and sexually abusing women at their homes when they know that the woman is alone, without a male in the family, or her husband or son works out of town (Justice Project Pakistan, 2015). This research will investigate the incidents of police abuse with the female ex-convicts during incarceration and after reintegration.

The reintegration of women into society after their release from jail is challenging because of manifold issues, from being homeless, rejection by their families, and the lack of financial support. Primarily, these women are isolated from society and lack contact with the outside world, resulting in their unfamiliarity with the societal changes and new social structure (Becker, 2018). Consequently, their circumstances to adjust to the new social order become exceedingly difficult, and their chances of successful reintegration are limited due to their lack of awareness of the prevailing social climate (Brand, 2016). Many women in prison struggle to adapt and thrive due to their histories of domestic violence, abuse, and marginalization (Nigam, 2014). Another factor that hampers the process of reintegration is the need for these women to find new places of residence, often resorting to hostel accommodations because they think that their families can kill them after prison as some family members tend to save their pride by killing the convicts, especially when they are involved in committing 'moral offences', or are victims of rape or other sexual abuse (Scott, 2017). Women may also be at risk of forceful return to a marriage with a violent partner as a punishment (Yadav, 2021). These circumstance leads to additional isolation and dislocation from society, making it challenging for these women to establish a support network and engage in community activities. Such challenges are also evident in the UK, USA, and Australian prison systems, where women are released into public housing in less desirable areas without adequate financial support to change their situation, thereby increasing the likelihood of reoffending (Beichner & Hagemann, 2022). In Nayari, Kenya, many women live in private hostels with friends until they relocate to a new place where no one knows them. If they get married, they must conceal their criminal record from their in-laws to survive (Muthee, 2020).

Research on reintegration challenges for women in Pakistan is notably scarce, despite the acknowledgement of difficulties faced by both men and women post-incarceration (Tariq, 2020). The absence of specific records addressing women's reintegration challenges leaves a significant gap in understanding the unique obstacles they may encounter. However, given the patriarchal nature of Pakistani society, it is convincing that women leaving incarceration face formidable hurdles in accessing employment, housing, healthcare, and social support services (Tariq, 2020). Without targeted interventions, the stigma associated with a criminal record may exacerbate their marginalisation, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage. Traditional gender roles may further complicate efforts to rebuild familial and community relationships (Muthee, 2020). Thus, comprehensive gender-sensitive policies and

interventions are imperative to address the distinct needs and vulnerabilities of female ex-offenders in Pakistan.

2.1.3. Finding Employment Opportunities

Several barriers exist that hinder the process of finding employment. In the pursuit of employment, an overwhelming majority of women reported encountering employers who exhibited negative behaviour towards them due to their previous convictions (Muller, 2020). This negative treatment often entailed automatic disqualification based solely on their prison record (Holzer, 2003). Consequently, a criminal record can have an especially devastating impact on a woman's ability to provide for herself and her family (Tariq, 2020). Thus, a considerable number of women expressed that the financial uncertainty associated with accepting low-wage jobs without any prospects for advancement made employment an unrealistic alternative to engaging in criminal activities (Holzer, 2003). In Africa, women reported that their property and possessions were stolen while they were inside the prison; in some cases, their properties were damaged, resulting in scarce financial means to start their lives again. Ex-convicts of Kenya had to hide their criminal record to get jobs, and most of them were working on the streets to hide their criminal record in earn money(Baldry & Maplestone, 2003).

Statistics reveal the stark employment-related challenges encountered by female ex-convicts' post-release in Sweden, with only around 30% employed a year after release. These women face significant hurdles in securing work, earning approximately 30% less than their counterparts without criminal records (Ahmed & Lång, 2017). Unemployment rates soar, with up to 60% remaining jobless a year post-release (Ahmed & Lång, 2017). Discrimination exacerbates their plight, as only 12% of employers are willing to hire women with criminal histories (Ahmed & Lång, 2017). Reentry into the workforce proves arduous, with only 17% of individuals employed full-time a year post-release (Ahmed & Lång, 2017). Drawing from these statistics, we can assume that if the female ex-convicts of developed countries face similar challenges, then what would be the situation of unemployment for ex-convicts in Pakistan in general and for women in particular, which further highlights the need for such studies in Pakistan.

2.1.4. Rebuilding Relationships with Family and Friends

The process of rebuilding family relationships for women after incarceration is filled with numerous challenges (Forte, 2023; Miller, 2022; Tariq, 2020). Stigma and shame surrounding their criminal history

weigh heavily, often complicating efforts to reconnect with family members (Becker, 2018; Crenshaw, 1991). Many female ex-offenders, burdened with parenting responsibilities, face the daunting task of resuming caregiving roles without adequate support systems in place (Muthee, 2020). Moreover, the lack of family meetings and assistance further hampers their efforts. Past trauma, coupled with mental health and addiction issues, exacerbates the struggle, hindering the establishment of healthy family dynamics (Miller, 2022). These multifaceted challenges underscore the pressing need for comprehensive support services tailored to the unique needs of female ex-offenders transitioning back into familial roles after incarceration.

Fractured relationships can be incredibly painful and difficult for incarcerated women (Becker, 2018; Muthee, 2020). One woman shared that her absence caused her children to accept her absence as a way to cope (Muller, 2020). Transitory periods can be especially challenging, as described by a former inmate who said that even though her children would visit her, they would leave feeling sad. It was particularly difficult for her because she couldn't ask about their distress, knowing it was caused by her actions (Muller, 2020). Women in this situation may feel a responsibility to nurture and repair, even though their absence and past behaviors caused the problems (Forte, 2023). Studies find that maintaining communication with family members is the first step in reconciling with their past actions (Becker, 2018). They yearn to show that they still care and constantly think about their loved ones, even though they are physically absent (Muthee, 2020).

Former prisoners often find it challenging to repair broken relationships with their families (Fash, 2018; Muthee, 2020),. The harm caused to their loved ones during their incarceration can make them doubt whether they will be accepted back into their lives (Forte, 2023). Both prisoners and their families undergo significant changes in their perceptions throughout the prison term (Bagri, 2010). Despite their initial determination to make positive changes, they often feel overwhelmed by the barriers they face, leading to a sense of failure (Muthee, 2020). Many women, in particular, feel abandoned by their families while they are in prison (Bagri, 2010). One woman vividly recalls her family believing she would never be released and her brother expressing that they had to let her go since she was no longer their responsibility (Abbott, 2021).

2.1.5. Coping with Stigma and Discrimination

The ability of women prisoners to successfully adapt to societal norms and structures is hindered by stigma and the development of a dependent mindset, which increases the likelihood of relapse into criminal behavior and conformity to negative stereotypes. Navigating a societal landscape that does not support their rehabilitation proves to be a difficult and costly task. Studies have demonstrated that stigma is linked to a higher recidivism rate, as individuals internalize the deviant label placed upon them and conform to that identity. In Pakistan, women have long been perceived in a particular way, and their imprisonment further reinforces the belief that they lack power and agency. This unjust judgment based on gender worsens the challenge for women prisoners to break free from their "inmate" identity, perpetuating a cycle of criminal behavior from their "inmate" identity, perpetuating a cycle of criminal behaviour (Becker, 2018; Crenshaw, 1991).

Depression, PTSD, and anxiety are most common among women who have been imprisoned at least once in their lives (Fash, 2018; Scott, 2017). Due to the compounded challenges women face, they are more susceptible to substance abuse, which further complicates their rehabilitation (Muthee, 2020). Mental health issues worsen if they are mothers with children inside or outside prison, as they often feel guilty and anxious about their children's future, which impacts their mental health and recovery (Booth, 2021). Limited access to resources such as education, job training, and healthcare hampers women's efforts to rebuild their lives after release (Brand, 2016). Additionally, the stigma and discrimination linked to criminal records create significant barriers to employment and housing opportunities for women (Becker, 2018; Tariq, 2020). The lack of support and resources post-release increases their risk of reoffending, highlighting the need for comprehensive interventions that address the multifaceted challenges of reintegration into society (Brand, 2016; Forte, 2023). This global body of literature on mental health issues faced by incarcerated women post-release underscores the urgent need for such programs. Before implementing these, however, a detailed study on the lives of female ex-convicts in Pakistan is critically needed.

2.1.6. Best International Practices

Internationally, women in incarceration are treated according to their specific needs. In Norway, the UK, and Canada, their prisons are gender-specific; their special focus is on mental health, they collect trauma

histories, and they focus on their caregiving roles. They have shifted their prison models from large, security-based common prisons to small prisons based in local communities that emphasize rehabilitation.

Community reintegration programs like the Women's Prison Association have been working since 1895 to ensure the smooth reintegration of women into society by providing them with transitional housing, legal advocacy, parental support, and counselling. They address issues such as gender-based violence, trauma, and abuse as underlying causes of women's incarceration and recidivism. Similarly, Elizabeth Fry Societies in Canada, women's centers like Anawin in the United Kingdom, and Falt Out Inc. in Australia are successfully supporting women in incarceration and reintegration. in incarceration and reintegration (Prison Reform Trust, 2013).

Over the past two decades, international human rights bodies and criminal justice systems have increasingly recognized the unique needs of incarcerated women. As a result, several countries have implemented gender-sensitive and rehabilitative best practices aimed at supporting women both during incarceration and upon reintegration into society(Muthee, 2020; Prison Reform Trust, 2013).

According to the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (Bangkok Rules, 2010), prison systems are encouraged to provide healthcare, vocational training, education, and family contact specifically suited to the needs of women. These rules highlight that women offenders often enter prison with histories of trauma, substance abuse, poverty, and caregiving responsibilities—necessitating targeted interventions rather than punitive approaches.

In Norway, for instance, prisons focus on restorative justice and humane treatment. Women prisoners are provided with access to education, psychological counselling, and vocational programs within an environment that mirrors life outside, supporting smoother reintegration (Pratt, 2008). Norway’s philosophy emphasizes dignity and rehabilitation over punishment, reflected in its low recidivism rates.
Canada has developed the “Creating Choices” initiative through the Correctional Service of Canada, which addresses the specific needs of women by offering trauma-informed care, community reintegration planning, and Indigenous healing lodges for Indigenous women offenders (CSC, 2014). These lodges

integrate cultural, spiritual, and psychological healing with community involvement (Prison Reform Trust, 2013).

Similarly, in Germany, the prison system emphasizes family contact, short sentences, and part-time incarceration for mothers. Women are encouraged to maintain strong familial ties, and mother-child units are integrated into prison facilities (Coyle, 2002). Germany's approach recognizes the long-term societal harm of severing maternal bonds(Prison Reform Trust, 2013).

In Australia, several states run post-release reintegration programs that offer transitional housing, job placement assistance, and mentorship for female ex-convicts. These services address the housing insecurity and social stigma that often hinders reintegration (Bartels & Gaffney, 2011).

Despite these advances, many developing countries, including those in South Asia, lag in adopting such reforms. Overcrowded prisons, lack of female staff, and poor access to legal aid and rehabilitation services remain pressing concerns (Baloch, 2011; Muthee, 2020). Comparative studies suggest that localized adoption of international standards, particularly the Bangkok Rules, could significantly improve the conditions of incarcerated women globally (UNODC, 2020).

2.1.7. Conclusion

This review of literature clearly highlights the scarcity of research on the lives of female ex-convicts and the challenges they face. Despite progress internationally in reforming prison systems and focusing specifically on gender-specific needs and tailored support for individuals re-entering society to reduce recidivism, the voices of female ex-convicts remain underrepresented, largely due to a lack of attention to ex-convict issues in general. This research gap hampers the development of informed policies that address the needs of both convicts and ex-convicts and limits our understanding of the reintegration process for female ex-convicts. Much existing literature is based on international studies that detail the difficulties faced by female ex-convicts, such as gendered pathways to crime, trauma, domestic violence, economic hardships, lack of housing and family support, societal stigma, social exclusion, and limited employment opportunities due to criminal records. Therefore, this study aims to bridge this gap by documenting the specific challenges faced by female ex-convicts in Pakistan after release, amplifying their voices. The goal

is to guide future research and promote gender-sensitive reforms within the criminal justice system and society.

This research is important and necessary as it is filling a critical gap in the literature by providing a foundation for reintegration frameworks that are more inclusive and responsive for female ex-convicts.

2.2.1. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The theoretical and conceptual framework of this research is based on the following main theories explaining different life stages of a female ex-convict: their life before incarceration, their time inside prison, and their life after incarceration.

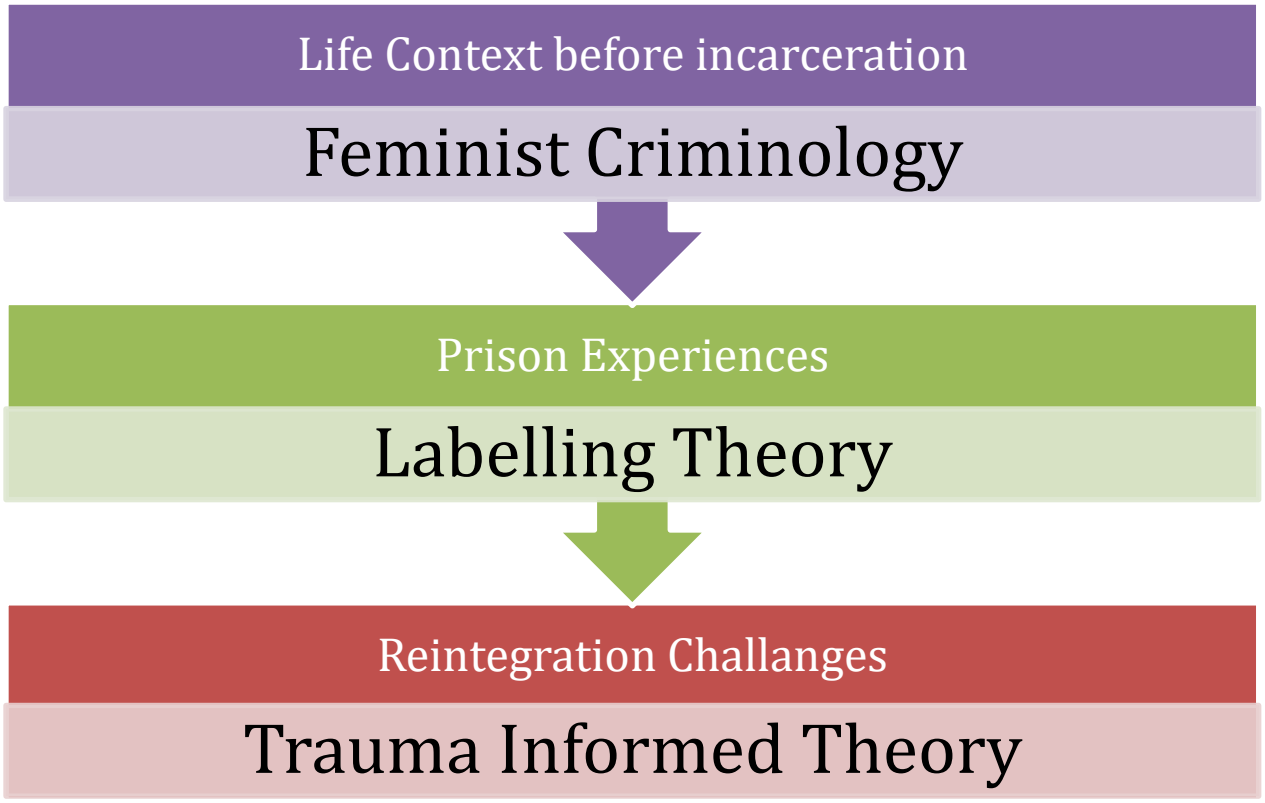
The Feminist Criminological Perspective (Barlow, 2014; Muthee, 2020) provides the overarching lens through which this research views women's experiences of crime and reintegration. It emphasizes that women's encounters with the criminal justice system cannot be understood without considering gendered power structures, patriarchal norms, and societal expectations. This perspective highlights how systemic inequality and discrimination shape women's pathways to crime, their treatment in prison, and their post-release reintegration challenges.

Labelling Theory (Becker, 2018) explains how societal reactions and labels—such as *"criminal"* or *"ex-convict"*—influence individuals' self-perception and social interactions. It helps to understand how stigma and stereotyping hinder women's reintegration, limit their access to opportunities, and contribute to social isolation or recidivism.

Trauma-Informed Theory (Barlow, 2014) emphasizes that trauma, particularly experienced during incarceration, has lasting effects on women's emotional and social functioning. It underscores the importance of recognizing and addressing trauma in reintegration processes. This theory helps explain how emotional wounds and unaddressed trauma can impede a woman's efforts to rebuild her life after prison.

Together, these frameworks allow for an in-depth understanding of the reintegration experiences of female ex-convicts, linking societal stigma, gendered power relations, and the enduring effects of trauma to the broader process of social reintegration.

The following is the visual representation of the theoretical framework.



2.2.2 Key Assumptions of the Conceptual Framework:

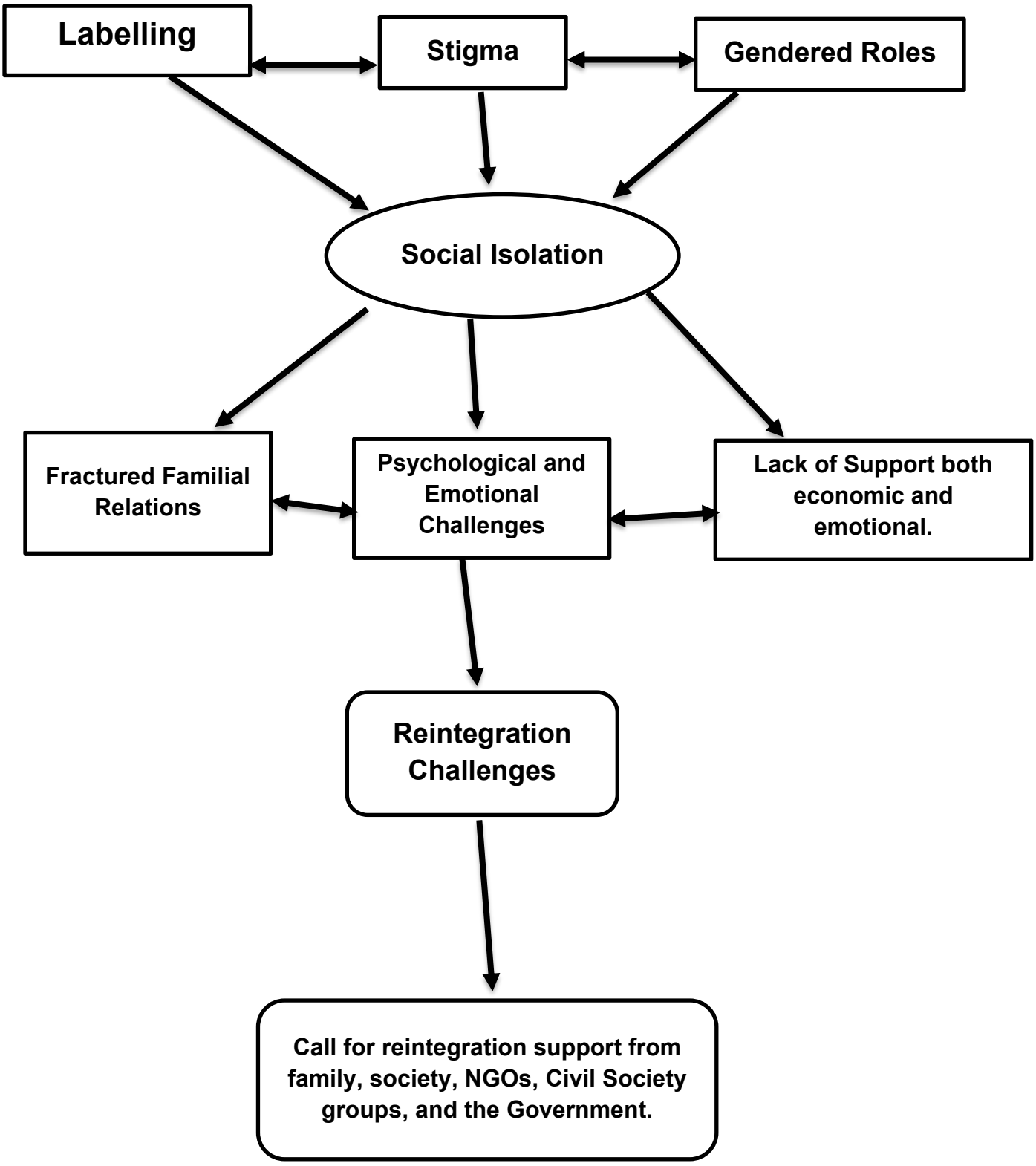
Based on the above theories, the conceptual framework was developed after a review of existing literature. This conceptual framework highlights the key factors that affect the life of a female ex-convict and how these factors are interrelated with trauma, societal behavior, stigma, lack of economic and emotional support, fractured ties with family members and friends, social cutoff, and lack of support from the government.

- Self-esteem of female ex-convicts is hit by labelling and stigma, resulting in social exclusion.
- Female ex-convicts face weakened or fractured family bonds or total abandonment by their close ones, which makes them prone to emotional vulnerability because of decreased family support.

- They face trauma in prison, and when this trauma combines with the already existing trauma, it results in psychological challenges and emotional vulnerability, which affects later in reintegration and life after that.
- Marginalization increases when they lack support resulting from a lack of gender specific rehabilitation programs.
- All of the challenges, psychological issues, and emotional and financial vulnerability can be reduced by introducing gender sensitive rehabilitation inside prison and support and reintegration programs for women outside prison.

2.3. Conceptual Framework

Visual representation of these concepts is shown in the following diagram:



Chapter 3

Research Methods and Methodology

3.1. Epistemological Orientation and Ontological Stance

It is important for researchers to clarify their ontological and epistemological positions as the first step of their journey to establish how they look at the world and what lens they are using to conduct the research (Lincoln et al., 2011). Research paradigms can be categorized into many approaches, some of which include positive approaches, critical theory, or interpretive approaches (Lincoln et al., 2011). Positivists look at the world as a concrete and absolute reality that can be measured through the five senses and call it 'objective reality'. On the other hand, interpretivists believe that reality or perceived reality comes into existence as a result of human actions and interaction (Khan et al., 2023). The key ontological assumption of interpretivists is that there is no objective reality; rather, reality is defined differently by different people based on the social and political context, as the social reality is 'the way people define it. So, the 'context' that creates reality is equally important in the interpretive approach as an ontological stance(Khan et al., 2023).

The current study is grounded in constructivism as its ontological assumption and interpretivist approach as its epistemological orientation. Constructivism believes that there isn't always a single reality; multiple realities can co-exist, and the reality is made by context, through the interaction of humans with other humans, institutions, and society, also known as 'social reality' (Neuman, 1997). The reality of female ex-convicts is not constant or similar; it's context-specific and hence cannot be understood through an objective lens. Individual experiences, cultural norms, and societal structure shape the identities of female ex-convicts, making every experience shape a unique story that needs to be understood in different stages of their lives, i.e., before, during, and after incarceration. Their realities are fluid, not concrete, shaped by their understanding of themselves, their families, societal structures, and their lived experiences, and also the society's perception of them (Fash, 2018; Forte, 2023). Hence, their reintegration is also a fluid process, shaped by everyday experiences of stigma, rejection, and lack of support, making it hard to understand through an objective lens; hence, constructivism as an ontological stance helps understand and explain the realities they are living in and the reintegration experiences of female ex-convicts.

An interpretative stance is used as epistemology in this research, seeking to understand the meaning that the female ex-convicts are assigning to their individual experiences. Hence, knowledge is being constructed by conversation and narrative sharing between the researchers and the respondents. Focus is on their lived experiences shared through their narrative, not on the numbers or results. This approach establishes that meaning is subjective, which is shaped by their individual societal context, their relationships, emotions, and their backgrounds.

Guba and Licoln (1985) support constructivism as ontological and interpretivism and epistemological stance especially when inquiring about human experiences, social realities and meanings assigned to the languages, by asserting that most of the times realities are constructed and there may exist multiple realities that are time specific, and interpretivist methods are the best ways to obtain knowledge in such cases as it gives importance to the meanings that participant ascribes to their realities. This research, by engaging with the narratives of the participants, aims to highlight the lived experiences of women in reintegration after imprisonment, uncovering their stance on what brought them to prison, how prison changed their lives and their perspectives towards life, how they experience reintegration as per demographics, how they perceive their marginalization, and how they navigate through this experience. An interpretivist approach aims to dig deep by asking questions about their emotional well-being, psychological conditions, and their social dimensions that impact their reintegration, surpassing that institutional perspective by giving voices to those silenced by the criminal justice system. This is also supported by (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), who suggest that in order to understand the complexity of human lives, qualitative methods must engage with subjective realities.

3.2. Research Strategy

The research strategy employed in this research is a qualitative narrative strategy, as warranted by the research questions and subject of study. The main aims of the study are:

- To analyze the life conditions of the female ex-convicts from their own perspectives.
- To analyze the specific challenges faced by female ex-convicts during and after incarceration.
- To discover what role the Prison System and its environment play in the lives of ex-convicts in Pakistan.

- To explore what options were practically available for ex-convicts during their prison era in terms of rehabilitation programs and how effective those programs were for their reintegration into society.
- To inquire into the relationship between the nature of crime committed by women ex-convicts and the marginalization that resulted in their lives after incarceration.

Studying a comprehensive understanding of such issues faced by women after they come out of prisons will solely focus on the firsthand experiences of the women who have been to prison and are now released with the title of 'ex-convicts' attached to them, and how it affects their lives. In studies that focus on understanding how people make sense of their surroundings through storytelling, narrative research best suits such research as it involves narrative interviews and decoding and analyzing those narratives to make themes and study subjective phenomena having multiple realities. The focus of the research is on collecting individual stories about what a woman goes through after prison, and what is the effect of the experience she had in prison, on her life she lives after release, while also taking into account what led her to end up in prison (Muthee, 2020). This study, hence, needs rich data that depicts the in-depth experiences and then concludes with some common themes from different respondents. This will be done through qualitative research. So, this study will utilize qualitative research to bring forward the plight of female ex-convicts.

3.3. Research Design

The study is Narrative Research. This research design was used because it needed life stories of female ex-convicts, which required an in-depth understanding of their perspectives, also done by (Fash, 2018). Narrative interviews helped to collect their personal stories that highlighted their post-incarceration experiences, as done by (Muthee, 2020). The interview guide was designed using open-ended questions that brought forward the experiences of women who faced the challenges and encouraged them to share their unique experiences without any disturbance of guided answers from the data collector. Through this, they shared their childhood, what brought them towards crime, how they dealt with marginalization and stigmatization, what challenges they faced, and what they want from society and the government to do for them. This research design helped in the analysis of rehabilitation programs and analyzed the stories shared by ex-convicts.

3.4. Data Collection Tools

This research has used qualitative methods of data collection, such as narrative interviews using open-ended questions to give the respondents space to share their stories freely, where they can share what they faced, what circumstances brought them to prison, and what helped them move beyond this traumatic experience. Their opinions on rehabilitation programs, their mental health, and how prison changed their lives.

In-depth interviews and a detailed interview guide were designed to bring forward the neglected realities of their lives. These interviews helped us understand their circumstances, the choices they had, and their opinion on societal structures.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of this study, which involved female ex-convicts, several ethical safeguards were carefully designed and implemented to ensure participants' rights, safety, and dignity were protected throughout the research process.

Informed Consent and Autonomy

Prior to participation, the purpose and scope of the research were explained in clear and accessible language. Participants were informed about the voluntary nature of the study, their right to refuse participation, and their freedom to withdraw at any stage without any negative consequences. Since some participants preferred not to sign written forms due to mistrust or privacy concerns, informed verbal consent was obtained. Consent procedures included clarification of how the data would be used and assurances that no personal disadvantage would result from non-participation.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

To safeguard participants' identities, pseudonyms were assigned, and all identifying details were removed from transcripts and analysis. Audio recordings, field notes, and transcriptions were stored in password-protected digital files accessible only to the researcher. In reporting findings, data was presented in a way that ensures participants cannot be traced or recognized by external readers.

Emotional Well-being and Non-Maleficence

Given that recalling experiences of incarceration and reintegration could evoke emotional distress, participants were explicitly informed that they could skip questions, pause, or discontinue the interview at any time. Interviews were conducted with empathy and sensitivity, prioritizing participants' comfort. The researcher maintained a supportive stance and avoided probing questions that could cause psychological harm.

Cultural Sensitivity and Respect for Dignity

The interviews were conducted in environments that were safe, private, and familiar to participants. Care was taken to use culturally appropriate and respectful language during the interviews. The researcher remained attentive to gender dynamics and societal stigmas faced by female ex-convicts, ensuring their dignity and autonomy were respected throughout the process.

Ethical Approval and Compliance

Formal ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant academic authority prior to data collection. All procedures adhered to established ethical research guidelines, particularly the principles of autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice. Strict confidentiality and the protection of participants' rights were central to all stages of the research process.

3.6. Sampling

The minimum criterion for sample selection was that participants must be women who had spent at least six months or more in prison after being charged with committing a crime. Female ex-convicts thus constituted the primary unit of data collection. Due to the challenges of locating these women—since many frequently change their phone numbers and places of residence following release—snowball sampling was employed as the most effective strategy to access this hard-to-reach population.

The final sample size was not predetermined but instead guided by two considerations: the availability of participants and the principle of data saturation, whereby interviews were concluded once no new themes were emerging from the data.

My sample size consists of 7 female ex-convicts:

Participants pseudonyms	Age	Time since release	Duration of imprisonment	Offense type	Marital Status	Children	Occupation
Zahida	55	22 years	1 year 3 months	Murder (302)	Widow	5	Lady Tailor
Nargis	42	13 years	5 years 6 months	Murder (302)	Married	5	Beautician
Rabail	38	10 years	5 years 6 months	Murder (302)	Divorced and then remarried	1	Waitress
Fakhra	43	10 years	12 years	Assisting husband in hiding the crime of Murder	Divorced	5	Tailoress
Kausar	45	10 years	4 years 4 months	Carrying Drugs (9C)	Married	None	Nanny
Natasha	35	6 Months	4 years 2 months	Carrying Drugs (9C)	Married	7	Housewife
Faiza	32	5 years	3 months	Attempt to Murder	Separated	1	House Help

3.7. Analysis

The research first gathered the narrative of female ex-convicts and then applied narrative analysis on the data collected through narrative interviews. **Narrative analysis** was well-suited for this research on the experiences of women in prison and aftercare because it allowed for an in-depth examination of their

complex and nuanced personal stories, capturing the full range of their experiences with violence, identity changes, and post-release challenges as used by the reference (Bagri, 2010; Muthee, 2020). **Conversational narrative inquiry** was used to analyze the life conditions of the participants. By identifying the issues and synthesizing the codes for the issues female ex-convicts face, with the help of primary data, **thematic narrative analysis** provided actionable insights that helped suggest recommendations and policy reforms, making it the most effective approach for understanding and addressing the specific needs of female inmates and their reintegration into society (Beichner & Hagemann, 2022).

The following tools of analysis were applied in this research:

- **Transcription**

The interviews were conducted in Urdu and in one case in the Pahari language, which we usually call 'potohari'. The interviews were transcribed word-for-word, as uttered by the respondents, and then translated into English to create a narrative and themes that were analyzed.

- **Coding**

This study employs inductive codding methods, where the transcriptions were read and reread many times and the themes that emerged from each transcription were listed and analyzed, hence following Inductive method, where the researcher breaks the transcriptions into narratives and stories, compares the narrative from the collection and identifies similarities and differences, then makes a core narrative, and then discovers what codes are emerging from the data. In simple words, we led the codes to emerge from the data.

- **Field notes**

  Field notes were maintained to keep a record of daily activities during data collection, to record the verbal and non-verbal gestures, ups and downs in the tone of the respondents, and the level of comfort of the respondents to relate it to their responses.

3.8. Locale of Research

The research was conducted with reference to Central Jail Rawalpindi, widely known as Adiala Jail, one of the largest and most prominent correctional facilities in Pakistan. The study targeted female ex-convicts who had previously served their sentences in Adiala Jail and who are presently residing in Rawalpindi or in the suburban localities of Islamabad. The selection of this site was guided by two key considerations: first, Adiala Jail accommodates a significant population of female inmates, making it a critical context for examining women's incarceration experiences; second, Rawalpindi and its adjoining Islamabad suburbs provide accessible communities where many former inmates reintegrate after release. This combination offers a pertinent socio-geographical setting for exploring the reintegration trajectories of female ex-convicts.

3.9. Limitations of Research

Even though the research offers valuable insights about the reintegration process and experience of female ex-convicts in Pakistan, it still has several limitations. Access to the participants was limited due to evident reasons, as the nature of the topic is sensitive and stigmatized, so those who agreed to be a part of this research can be expected to show a bit resistance to disclosing full experiences of their life due to any fear, social pressure, or any trauma attached with their story. The size of the sample is small and non-random, which also affects the generalizability of the findings and results to the broader population of female ex-convicts in Pakistan. The reliability of the provided data could also be impacted as the narrative research is based heavily on personal storytelling, as the respondent's memory and their personal interpretation of the situation might not be as accurate and could have been affected in the process. Moreover, the researcher's academic background and personal biases possibly could have influenced the findings due to the subjective nature of qualitative analysis.

In addition to that, time and resource constraints are other factors to limit the scope of research, hence creating an opportunity for future researchers to research on broader aspects of the lives of female ex-convicts from different provinces and cultures of Pakistan. Translation from Urdu and other regional languages to English may also have limited the research by losing some of the emotional depth and cultural nuance due to language barriers. The study highlights a critical gap in the literature and policy to support female ex-convicts despite all the limitations; it still holds potential to become a foundation for further research on the lives of female ex-convicts in Pakistan.

3.10. Significance of Research

This research will help inform public policy, especially reforms for the criminal justice system, and build rehabilitation programs that are gender sensitive to ex-convicts. It will also help improve vocational training programs from the perspective of those experiencing them personally, moreover, it will help understand the importance of family and societal support for increasing the chances of successful reintegration in society. Through the narrative research we can bring forwards the stories of women in crime, and can inform the impact of societal stigma, labelling and discrimination of the lives of ex-convicts and can find areas of intervention where required by government or society to help better the lives of ex-convicts and reduce the chances of recidivism by providing psychological support like counselling, improved vocational training and societal support.

By highlighting the lived experiences of women once involved in crime and their marginalization, the research can add to the theoretical understanding of post-incarceration experiences of female ex-convicts and the intersectionality of crime, patriarchy, and rehabilitation. Moreover, the research will build feminist criminology by giving a detailed understanding of stigma, social exclusion, and economic challenges female ex-convicts are facing, bringing to light the issues of female ex-convicts in Pakistan, and through their perspective and lived experience, the government can improve its policies to reduce the involvement of women in crime. By understanding the sociology of punishment, theories of social reintegration, familial, cultural, and institutional factors affecting the chances of successful reintegration, the research can analyze societal discrimination and help increase the chances of successful reintegration. This research will also help identify the gaps in laws and policies of the criminal justice system.

This research will be useful and informative for the Ministry of Human Rights by addressing the post-incarceration marginalization and concerns related to Human Rights violations in and outside prisons. The Ministry of Law and Justice and the Ministry of Interior and Prison Department can also consider this research while formulating gender sensitive policies of rehabilitation and incarceration to ensure increased support to better the criminal justice system and to reduce crime rates and rates of recidivism in Pakistan. This research can also inform the Social Welfare Department and Non-governmental Organizations working on women empowerment, to increase their support to the convicted and ex-convict women in Pakistan through social services, vocational training, and by assisting women in their transition back into society.

Chapter 4: Results

4.1. Theme 1: Stories Behind Their Action

Gender Pathways Theory explains that women's pathways towards crime are different from men's, mostly determined by factors like gender-based experiences, domestic violence, sexual and psychological abuse, societal expectations, and poverty (Barlow, 2014). Studies suggest that out of four women involved in criminal behavior, three were previously victims of abuse, sexual violence, and injustice(Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004). Feminist criminology critiques traditional ways of the criminal justice system, where a woman's factors behind a crime are neglected, and women are treated with the same procedures and kept in the same environment designed for men (Barlow, 2014; Muthee, 2020). These theories emphasize to study the circumstances in which the women lived before committing a crime and what were the factors that led her to take such an action, because as per Gender Strain Theory women are less violent and less involved in criminal activities than men and when they commit a crime, they are mostly driven by gender based violence or stress related to their gender roles (Barlow, 2014). When these lenses are combined, they make the narratives of ex-convicts not just a confession or stories but a reflection on systemic failure, survival tactics, and gender trauma.

Zahida, a 56-year-old woman convicted of murdering her husband, shared that she experienced domestic and sexual violence for more than twenty years in her marriage. She also shared that she asked for help from her family members and community, and after listening to her and accepting her as a victim of domestic and sexual violence, they asked her husband to stop this behavior or else leave her. Her husband didn't agree to leave her and took her to an area far away from her family and that community. She was advised to leave him, but she feared that if she got divorced, her children would suffer. Gender Strain theory claims that the strain created by society due to gendered norms and lack of choices for women leads them to commit a crime, and if those factors are not removed, rehabilitation is affected, and the chances of recidivism increase (Barlow, 2014). Here, Zahida was given two choices: one to leave her husband and live at her uncle's home with her five children, which would have increased the chances of her dependency and taking a lifetime of favor from her relatives, which would have affected her children's self-esteem and created another factor of shame or stigma in society for her. She refused to get that extra favor because in the past she had experienced the shame born out of her husband's misconduct with their relatives. She said,

He beat me—so much that I lost count. One day, he dragged me away to the house of my uncle's sons. When we arrived, they told him, "To hit a woman is like striking the earth—it is sacred. We cannot allow you to live in our home and abuse our daughter like this. Either divorce her and hand her over to us, we will raise the children or leave the house."

But he replied, "No, I won't let her go. I'll scar her with iron and devour her—but I won't leave her."

She refused the offer, claiming not to disturb her relatives, who were just good people helping and supporting her; she didn't want to create a disturbance for them. So, she went with her husband, but her husband continued the violence. She said that they moved to a rented house, and he felt completely free to do as he pleased. She shared that he beat her every day. She said,

"He would drag me by my hair down the stairs while the women in the neighborhood watched me like I was a spectacle. After beating me, he would say, "Go ask your mother if she will still agree to my brother's marriage to your younger sister." I used to sit outside, gather myself, and return home silently—just so my mother wouldn't worry. But every night, it was the same horror, worse than the last. Every day, a new depth of pain".

Relation theory suggests that a woman's pathway towards crime is different from men, and it's because of her relations that she tries not to indulge in crime; her roles as mother, daughter, and wife keep her docile, connected, and away from criminal tendencies (Barlow, 2014). Here, Zahida proved through her constant efforts to save her family by remaining silent, enduring pain and violence, just to keep her family structure intact and to save her children's self-esteem by letting them live with their father. But, when the same father became a threat to their children, she shared that her patience ended and at first she decided to commit suicide but thinking of her daughters who were her husband's next target as her daughters told her that they were being verbally and sexually harassed by their own biological father, she said she decided to take the step, which she confessed was not right in her eyes, but she claimed that she had no other option. She shared,

He would tell me, "You're too deep. No one will ever know what you are thinking." The night before I killed him, he stripped me of my clothes and forced me to sit on the open staircase that led to the street. We lived in the upper portion. I sat there for over an hour, naked, exposed. A sweater lay there that we used for mopping the floor. I pulled it over myself and sat in silence. A small

boy passed by and stared hard at me, confused. I stayed frozen there. After some Time, he opened the door, and I went upstairs, put on my clothes, only to be beaten again.
That staircase was open to the alley. Everyone could see. There was a little boy in our neighborhood who looked at me, although he was little, but I will never forget the surprise and weirdness in his gaze. There was no shame left to lose. I waited for him to open the door.

The Gendered Pathways theory, which maintains that women almost never commit crimes without being driven by a combination of abuse, trauma, and systemic oppression, is highlighted by this horrible incident. Until circumstances force them to choose between committing a crime and continuing to live with injustices, women often endure violence in silence.
She remained silent for more than two decades, driven by a deep sense of helplessness in a patriarchal system that offered no assistance, as well as a desire to protect her honor and the lives of her children. But her endurance peaked the night she made the decision to act. Her dignity had been completely undermined after being stripped, humiliated, and beaten once more. When her husband started abusing their daughters, the violence spread beyond her, and she had no other option—moral, emotional, or social. This murder was the result of desperation brought on by institutional weakness, structural neglect, and ongoing domestic abuse rather than innate criminal intent. This aligns with the Gendered Pathways perspective, which emphasizes that women's criminality is often a last resort, shaped by survival, oppression, and the absence of avenues for protection or justice.
She shared further,

When he opened the door, he then grabbed my hair and said, "How much patience do you have?" I replied, "As deep as the sea. You've tested my patience—but you've never seen my anger."

I thought, 'You've humiliated me to my core. I will not let you go unpunished.'

The next night, he beat me with a plastic pipe. Then he grabbed a shoe and began hitting me with that, too. My young son grabbed his waist and cried, "Abu, please, don't be so cruel!"
But I had no strength left—not even to stand, let alone fight back.
That night, I decided to use it (the knife). I told myself I would strike so hard that no one would ever believe a woman could do such a thing."

She shared that the next morning, after one of the beatings, her husband left the house. She went to the market with her daughter and bought a knife, asking the shopkeeper to sharpen both edges. That evening, when her husband returned home, she said he again beat her mercilessly. This Time, he even warned her that he would call her mother to show her condition, humiliating her further. She said that she was tortured again that night as he used a green plastic pipe, cut to a yard and a half, and folded double, to strike her. She shared that he dragged her by the hair and kicked her in the stomach with such force that the marks lasted for over a year. She said she was in such a condition that she could not even stand. Despite the lack of energy in her body that night, she said she struck him. She had hidden the knife and stood silently against the wall. As he came toward her in rage, she slashed him across the stomach. *"I did not stop,"* she said. "*Even when he pleaded, I kept stabbing until he stopped breathing. These drug-addicted men… they only know how to talk. They cannot act. He could not even defend himself."* She shared with a mixture of anger, hatred, and helplessness in her voice. She endured physical and emotional pain for twenty years for her children, and when she got the hint that her daughters were going to be her husband's next target, she decided to end his life. She was not proud to do that; she confessed to having done wrong, but she also shared that she had no other option. She shared that she couldn't report her case to the police because there were her husband's friends in the Police, and she wanted to avoid the stigma attached to reporting and going to the police station. To defend herself and to save her children from violence, she killed her husband.

No one said a word to me, because everyone already knew."

When she committed the crime, she went to her uncles; she shared everything with them, and she said no one questioned him, because everyone knew. The statement suggests that, despite being aware of everything, society chooses to remain quiet or stay away from the matter. Her statement also indicates that when she told everyone everything, and no one did anything to save her, now, when she did something, everyone stayed quiet because they knew that they had no right to say anything, and they couldn't do anything, as no one could change what had happened. Zahida's story is an example of dependency and domestic violence, showing that a woman tries not to get involved in violent crimes, but when her dignity and survival are hit again and again, and she has nowhere to go, and asking for help gets so difficult, she reacts(Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004). Her word, "*No one said a word to me, because everyone already knew*", show criminal negligence from our society when it comes to a matter of husband and wife, they

often refuse to get involve and if they do, like her cousins, they can do nothing to keep her safe, they sent her with him despite knowing how ruthless he was with her. It's a lifetime of trauma that a woman experiences, first at her home, then in prison, and after that, living with titles like 'murderer' and 'ex-convict'.

Zahida's story shows a woman in pain and struggling to deal with domestic violence daily. Nargis's story shows a different but equally disturbing scenario, where she was constantly being harassed and stalked by a young boy in her in-laws. She shared, *"He used to follow me. He would call me from different numbers and say things like, "I've fallen in love with you. Leave your children and come with me."* At that time, she was thirty years old and had five children. She told her husband and her father-in-law about the young man stalking and harassing her, but they neglected it, saying, *"He's just a kid. Don't overthink it".* It was a matter of the intimate family, and they considered him young and non-serious, thinking he wouldn't do anything. She kept avoiding him. He used to come to their house with his mother, used to call her through different mobile numbers, and he finally broke into her house when she was alone and tried to impose his will on her by showing her the gun and saying he would kill himself if she didn't agree to be with him. She tried to stop him, and in doing so, the gun fired, and he was accidentally killed. She spoke with dismay in her voice about society; who would have believed her? She was defending herself and her dignity, but everything got ruined for someone else's forced lust and will. She said,

> *"I became very cautious. He had been coming to our house since he was a child. The day it happened, he came over with his mother. She had to leave briefly for an errand, and he entered my room while I was alone. He tried to force himself on me. When I resisted, he pulled out a pistol.*
>
> *In that moment, all I could think was: If he kills himself in our home, how will I ever live down the shame? What will people say? They'll blame me. They'll say I must have encouraged him somehow. After all, no one becomes obsessed with a woman like that without a reason, right?"*
>
> *"He pointed the gun at his own head. I tried to stop him. I tried to snatch the pistol away. In that struggle, the gun went off. He died right there in front of me."*

She shared that her life was shattered into pieces due to that incident. She was of the view that if a person living peacefully, minding their own business, an accident gets them into prison and changes their life trajectory, it ruins every bit of their life, from their routines to their relations and belonging. Nargis said,

"I used to think why it happened to me, I was living peacefully, I never had bad intentions for anyone, neither for that guy (who blackmailed her), I had children, I had a home, I was busy with them. Then why did it happen to me? Then I thought maybe it's destiny, but it still hurts. I ruined my whole life, only God and I know what I endured in those 5 ½ years, completely abandoned." Her statement, "Why did it happen to her?" indicates that she was a passive participant in her own story; she had little to no agency, and when she tried to say 'No' to a guy, he forced his will. In that very moment, she was thinking about society. In the end, when everything happened, when she couldn't comprehend it, she accepted it as her destiny, but the Gendered Pathways Theory explains this phenomenon, claiming that most of the women resist crime, due to their docile and sensitive nature and the close familial bonds as their roles in society as a woman, but when they commit a crime, it is mostly driven by gendered factors (Barlow, 2014). Here, Nargis couldn't speak up due to her husband's honor, for her children, and avoided the situation, which turned into an accident resulting in a murder. She explained,

"I went to jail. Our honor in society was destroyed. My husband distanced himself from me. My children were neglected. And for what? What did I gain from all of this? What was my fault? That I didn't walk the wrong path? That I refused him? Even today, my eldest son hates me. I cannot live freely, and I cannot die peacefully. I am trapped between guilt I don't deserve and a truth no one wants to hear."

Nargis is 42 years old now. She shared that she lost precious years of her life in prison, she lost her peaceful home and a settled life, she still suffers, and all of this is for saying 'NO' to a guy who claimed to love her and wanted her at any cost. She said she never wanted to be with him; she was happily living in her home with her children. She refused to get engaged in an extramarital relationship, and she faced humiliation, stigma, the tag of 'murderer', and was imprisoned just for a man's ego. When someone doesn't intend to commit a crime and ends up in prison. No one can imagine their pain and suffering, especially when they are women.

Rabail suffered from this pain as well. She got trapped in a crime scene planned by her step-uncles, and just her presence at the scene became her fault. She became suspicious and was forced to admit what she never did or even imagined doing. She came to Rawalpindi via Daewoo and went straight to the hospital, where her paternal uncles asked her to go rest at home. When she stepped inside her mother's home, she

saw her stepfather's dead body. As she was the first one to step in after the murder, the police caught her and charged her with murdering her stepfather. She explained getting trapped in a plan, in her words, as

> *"This was all done with a lot of planning. When a person gets trapped in a planned setup… and there are ten men behind the plan and only one woman involved, then it becomes extremely difficult for her." "When my stepfather died, everything had been planned—every accusation was placed on me. And when I was arrested… when a woman's clothes are at stake, she says No matter what happens, just don't take my clothes off. She becomes willing to admit to anything. I was the one nominated in that case."*

The statement underscores the profound sense of helplessness Rabail experienced as a woman within a patriarchal context, where she was coerced by men into taking responsibility for a crime she did not commit. The threat to strip her clothes if she refused further illustrates how, within patriarchal structures, women are systematically deprived of agency and subjected to gendered forms of violence and humiliation. This episode reflects the broader maxim that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely—particularly when wielded in institutions that lack accountability. Despite neither intending to nor being involved in any criminal act, Rabail was forced to endure the violence of police custody and prolonged imprisonment while awaiting trial, simply to prove her innocence. Her experience poses a critical challenge to the legitimacy of the criminal justice system, revealing how unchecked police authority disproportionately victimizes women and perpetuates cycles of injustice.
She said that the nightmare began with the arrest of her entire family.

> *"I kept saying, 'Let them go. If I am the one nominated in the case, then sentence me to death. There is nothing worse than this, is there?"*

But the police did not listen. Instead, they stormed her house, ransacked every room, and stripped it bare. *"They took everything,"* she recalled bitterly. *"My jewelry was ripped from my ears, my bangles pulled off so violently that I never got them back."* The brutality was relentless. Officers dragged her by the hair, beat her, and threatened to strip her if she refused to confess. *"Imagine ten men standing in front of a woman, saying they will strip her, burn her body with cigarettes, do whatever they want. Of course, that woman will say, 'Yes, I have committed ten murders.'"* With tears in her eyes, she explained how she

surrendered to their demands: *"I said, 'Don't hurt me. Yes, I did it.' I still have that document where I denied everything at first, but in the end, I admitted to crimes I never committed."*

She described the day her stepfather was killed. At the time, she was in Lahore. She had received a call that her sister was being operated on and rushed back to Rawalpindi by bus—her ticket proving that she was nowhere near the scene of the murder. When she returned, she went straight to the hospital, then home to cook soup for her sister, as her mother had asked. But when she entered the house, she was met with a foul smell. She followed it to her stepfather's room, and there, in the darkness, her foot slipped on something sticky. When she switched on the light, she froze. His dead body lay in front of her. She screamed, and within moments, her step-uncles entered the room.

"They called the police," she said, her voice shaking. "But instead of investigating, the police grabbed me. They pulled my hair, beat me, and said if I didn't confess, they would strip me. Ten men stood there, threatening me. In that moment, I felt my soul leave my body. I surrendered. I admitted everything, just to make it stop."

She went on to explain how her life unraveled long before that day. Her father had been a successful businessman. *"We had everything,"* she said quietly. *"Cars, jewelry, a beautiful home. He brought money home in bags. But he gave us everything except education. That is my biggest regret."* After her father's divorce, her mother married his best friend—her stepfather. With him came betrayal, financial ruin, and family conflict. She openly disliked him, and her step-uncles used that against her.

"They trapped me, they killed him for money, but they pinned it on me, my mother, and my younger sister."

The imprisonment destroyed what little she had left. Her love marriage, once her source of strength, ended in divorce. *"He said I was not pure anymore,"* she recalled bitterly. *"When a woman marries for love, nothing else matters. But when she is wrongfully accused, what is left after that?*

Looking back, she could only sum up her suffering with one lesson: "All of this was done for money. Money is the root of all evil. If someone earns well, they should protect it and, above all, educate their children. Otherwise, people can go to any level to snatch your happiness."

Rabail shared that she still feels the pain of being charged with a crime she never committed. A person living a straight and simple life, deceived by relatives and trapped in a plan, their lives get traumatized and suffer from an unfamiliar pain and grievances. She told with a lot of pain in her voice that,

> *"This life, these moments… they are so difficult. It's said that some people are accustomed to it; they go to jail, come out, and start a business, establishing a routine. But for someone who has always looked at her hijab, her home… for a woman like that, it is unbearably difficult."*

In Rabail's case, policemen were involved with the criminals; they forced a woman to confess to a crime she never committed, they fabricated false evidence, and they put her mother and sister in prison as well. Her marriage ended in divorce, for which she waited ten years before marrying the man she liked. This stigma and forceful conviction transformed her from a strong, independent woman to a dependent, helpless woman striving daily to survive. She never committed the crime for which she was sentenced and punished. Feminist criminology emphasizes the need to examine the gendered experiences and circumstances of women who become entangled in the criminal justice system. It argues that women's treatment within this system must account for the unique forms of victimization, social control, and structural inequalities that shape their lives. Unlike men, women often face lifelong repercussions that extend beyond their prison sentence; once a woman enters prison, her life trajectory is profoundly and often irreversibly altered in negative ways.

Cases such as Rabail's exemplify how women, despite their innocence, can be drawn into the justice system due to systemic loopholes, patriarchal practices, and coercive policing. Their imprisonment represents not merely a legal injustice but also a social and personal one, as the stigma of incarceration persists even after acquittal. For such women, leaving prison does not signify the end of punishment. Rather, they continue to bear the burden of wrongful incarceration, enduring the social exclusion, reputational damage, and personal loss that follow them indefinitely.

Fakhra's case is also an example of a woman entangled in a web of relationship with husband and children, being uneducated and unskilled, she was more dependent on her husband, and her husband accidently killed her owner's wife, their owner was a very influential person and when her mother and relatives refused to support her, she said she had no other option but to live with him to support her children by

hiding his crime. She said that she and her husband had been working as house help for an influential family, living in their servant quarters with their three children. The lady of the house was known for her strictness and constant taunts. *"She would humiliate us over the smallest things,"* she said. One day, while her husband was working in the garden with a sickle, the lady began yelling at him again, mocking his background and telling him that people like them had no worth. Hurt and humiliated, her husband, in a moment of anger, flung the sickle against the wall. But it struck her instead.

"She (the owner) was alive when he came running to me," she recalled. "He said, '*We must leave. I hurt her. Her husband won't spare us; our children will suffer.'"*

Confused and terrified, she followed his instructions. Without gathering any belongings, they fled. Her mother refused to shelter them, fearing the wrath of their influential employer. For ten years, they lived on the run, hiding from the law, moving from one city to another. During that time, she gave birth to two more children, constantly fearing for their safety.

"I always thought of my children," she said, "because I knew they would suffer the most."

When the police finally caught them, everything they owned was taken in front of their eyes. "*They ransacked our home, they even took the glass jar where I used to save money,"* she recounted. "*They said, 'It happens during investigation.' They took our television and other household items, too. By the time I was released, we had nothing left—we had to start from scratch."* It was only after their arrest that she learned the shocking truth: the lady had not died from her husband's sickle, but from bullets. "I was shaken to the core. My husband never had a gun. I didn't hear any fire that day. Later, we discovered that our owner had enemies over land disputes. He got his land back by settling the case with them, but everything was pinned on my husband." She was not trying to defend her husband.

"He was wrong too, and I was wrong for assisting him," she admitted. "But should a person who hides the truth be punished the same as the person who kills? I had five children; how could I abandon their father? Who would have supported us? I had no education, no skills, and my parents refused to help me."

Her voice broke as she remembered the court's decision. She was sentenced to 25 years, the same as someone who commits murder. Later, it was reduced to 12 years. "

> But wasn't being forced to give my children to Edhi Home punishment enough?" she asked. "My little boy had to start working at a shop when he was only four. My daughters grew up with strangers. Do you know what society does to girls who are left unattended? Every day, I lived with fear of what might happen to them. That thought killed me more than prison ever could."

She herself suffered physically and emotionally in prison. The stress of her children's safety gave her heart problems; she contracted tuberculosis but continued to work inside the prison despite doctors" recommendations to rest.

> "I went through hell," she whispered. "For what? For just trying to survive? Was it fair?"

Her marriage, too, collapsed under the weight of her incarceration. *"It was his fault that brought us here, yet in the end, he divorced me,"* she said bitterly. *"My children and I suffered, while he walked away."* When she was finally released, she stepped into a world that offered no support. *"No one cared how I was living,"* she said. *"The government knew my situation, but no one helped. We rented a single room, and my sons became daily wage workers. There were days we had nothing to eat and slept on empty stomachs. It took us five years just to reach a simple, basic life, and even today, we struggle."*

Her sons never received a proper education because they had to work to support their family. One of them learned magic tricks and dreams of starting his own business, but he lacks the money to set it up. *"Whatever he earns goes into paying rent for the props he borrows,"* she explained. She paused, then said firmly: *"We are still struggling to settle in our lives. We need support from the government. Even small loans would help—we can pay them back, but we need financial assistance to rebuild. I request, through your work, that the government support those who come out of prison. We women suffer more than anyone else. Without help, we cannot stand on our own."*

Fakhra's narrative exemplifies the gendered vulnerabilities of women who become entangled in crime not through their own direct actions, but through the coercion, dependency, or influence of intimate partners. Her story reflects how structural inequalities, patriarchal norms, and socio-economic limitations shape

women's pathways to incarceration. In Fakhra's case, her financial and emotional dependence on her husband constrained her choices, as leaving him would have meant jeopardizing her children's well-being, a fear that ultimately materialized. She admitted that she was aware of the wrongdoing but emphasized that she did not deserve the death sentence for her complicity, particularly as she had five children depending on her.

Her statement highlights a crucial dimension of feminist criminology: the need to contextualize women's involvement in crime within the broader framework of gendered power relations, social expectations, and systemic inequities. Fakhra herself acknowledged that, had she been economically independent, she would not have supported her husband in concealing his crime. This underscores how a lack of education, financial autonomy, and awareness renders women more vulnerable to manipulation and coercion by male partners, eventually leading to their criminalization and imprisonment.

Such cases demand a differentiated approach within the criminal justice system, one that recognizes the intersection of gender, poverty, and dependency in shaping women's choices and actions. Treating women like Fakhra identically to men disregards the structural and relational contexts that lead them to crime. Instead, justice mechanisms must adopt gender-sensitive policies that account for women's caregiving responsibilities, economic precarity, and lack of agency, ensuring that punishment does not reproduce or intensify cycles of marginalization.

This lack of education and awareness harms not only the individual but can also affect their families. When a person lacks knowledge about a law or an act, their chances of getting manipulated increase. This lack of information, awareness, and blind trust led Kausar and Natasha to prison; both were charged with an act of 9C, which is a subsection of the Control of Narcotics Substances Act (CNSA) that deals with people who get involved in possessing, trafficking, or transporting narcotics in large quantities. 9C is non-bailable, and those who get caught with an amount of narcotics that exceeds the legally defined limit they sentenced to life imprisonment, death sentence, or a huge fine (Government of Pakistan, 1997).

Two out of 7 respondents were arrested on the charge of 9C. Both said that they were asked to sit in a car that would leave the city to transport materials for daily use by people. They trusted people because they were their friends; this blind trust often led to them becoming scapegoats and getting into trouble. Both of

my respondents had financial issues. Kausar's husband had to pay for some expenses he couldn't manage from his daily work. He shared his problem with a friend, who manipulated him, and accidentally, Kausar found herself in that vehicle as she had wanted to buy some things at a reasonable cost in Peshawar.

She began her story with a sigh, almost as if she was still trying to understand how her life had turned upside down. *"My husband's first wife had filed a maintenance case,"* she said that her husband had to pay 28,000 rupees every month. She said that he was a hardworking man, a retired dispenser, but it became impossible for him to manage. That's when he started looking for work. He told a friend about his situation, and the friend assured him there was nothing to worry about. He said, *'Oh man, it's no problem. We'll bring Patti—tea—from Peshawar to Lahore. You'll just have to sit with me in the car. Nothing more. Just load and unload the tea.'*

When he returned from his first trip, he told me happily that it really was just tea, and with these trips, we could pay back the 200,000 rupees of debt we owed. He was a tall, well-built man, and later he told me the friend wanted him to sit in the car because he looked like an army Major or Colonel. It gave them cover." She paused, then added quietly, *"That was the beginning of our destruction."* Her younger brother ran a small video game shop. When he heard that her husband was going to Peshawar, he asked to join, thinking he could buy stock for his shop and save travel costs. Around the same time, her younger sister's wedding was near. She too decided to accompany them, hoping to buy dowry items at cheaper rates.

"The man got nervous," she recalled. *"But he didn't refuse. He allowed us to sit in the car. Then he suddenly received news that the police would check the car on the way. He made an excuse about going to the hospital and left the car, asking my husband to drive instead."*

At the police checkpoint, everything changed. *"When they stopped us and asked what we were carrying, my husband replied honestly, 'Tea.' He had no idea. None of us did. But when the police checked the car, they found drugs hidden under the seats and inside the doors."* Her voice trembled. *"That's how we got stuck unknowingly. We were living a respectable life. My husband had built a small medical store with his retirement money. He was earning well. If those financial pressures had not come, he would never have gone looking for extra work. Friends can destroy your wrong friends, and you lose everything. We lost our honor, our respect."*

She vividly recalled the shock of that moment. She said that at the checkpoint, she had no idea what was happening. Her brother was still a minor. He couldn't comprehend it either. She was in shock, thinking that she had just come along to buy things for her sister's wedding. She said that they were staring in disbelief while the police kept saying, *'You knew everything.'* But we didn't."
The cruelty of the process hit her next.

> *"No one told us that we would be imprisoned for four years. We weren't informed until after we were transferred from the lockup to prison. Even then, when I reached jail, I was told I'd be bailed out in three months. I had no idea what 9C was. It was only inside jail that people told me it was the section under which we were charged, for carrying drugs. Even my husband had no clue."*

This narrative highlights how women's involvement in crime often emerges from structural inequalities and relational contexts rather than deliberate criminal intent, aligning with the Gendered Pathways Theory. The woman entered the criminal justice system not through independent decision-making, but rather due to her husband's economic strain, his friend's influence, and her role as a supportive wife and sister. Her presence in the car was tied to socially constructed responsibilities — arranging her sister's dowry and accompanying family members — reflecting how women's caregiving and relational duties can inadvertently place them at risk of entanglement in criminal activities.

The story also reveals a lack of awareness and power in decision-making. She neither knew about the drugs nor the legal implications of being present during the transport, yet she bore equal consequences. This reflects the gendered vulnerability the theory emphasizes: women are often collateral participants, implicated because of familial or relational ties, with limited agency in preventing or contesting the circumstances. Her shock at learning about the severity of the charge (9C) further illustrates how systemic and informational barriers leave women particularly disadvantaged once caught in the justice system.

Finally, the case underscores the compounded consequences women face, where social respectability, economic survival, and family ties intersect to create unintended pathways to incarceration. Her reliance on her husband's choices, her caregiving roles, and trust in male relatives and friends align with Daly's framework of "relational pathways," showing how women's roles as wives, daughters, and sisters expose them to criminal liability despite the absence of direct criminal intent.

In cases of 9C, the gangs and the agents look for innocent people to shield themselves from getting caught. Natasha, a simple woman living with her family of two children and husband, who was a daily wager, said that one of the agents (a female) befriended her by visiting her home on a daily basis to do stitching and embroidery work. After examining her daily routine and finances closely, she offered to drive her out of the city in a car, and in return, she would receive money. She needed money at that time, and she shared this with her husband, who ignored the offer; however, she went for the sake of the money. When they got caught, they blamed Natasha and made a deal with the police. The reason they kept Natasha with them was that if they got caught at any point, they could get her to the front by putting all the blame on her and escape, as the police must provide names if anything like that happens.

She began by explaining how it all started with a friend she trusted. *"With me was that friend of mine and one of her companions,"* she recalled. The friend had insisted that her companion would accompany them out of the city so that the women would not be alone. Believing this, she agreed. She was carrying her child in her lap, sitting in the front car, while her friend and the companion followed behind in another vehicle.

When they reached the motorway checkpoint, she did exactly what she had been instructed. *"I told the police I was taking the child to the village,"* she said. But then the search began. To her horror, the police uncovered a large quantity of drugs hidden in the car. She froze. *"I had no idea what had just happened to me. I was so scared and anxious,"* she recounted. In the chaos, the driver offered the police officers five lakh rupees and quickly disappeared. The entire blame, however, fell squarely on her shoulders.
She remembered sitting in the holding cell, receiving messages from her friend assuring her that they would get her released. But no one came. It was only after being sent to jail that the truth became clear.

> *"I realized then how big a mistake I had made. This was truly a wrong act. I trusted blindly without thinking, didn't even listen to my husband, chose to honor a friendship — but that so-called friend used me."*

Cases under Section 9C of the Control of Narcotics Substances Act are particularly critical in understanding women's pathways into crime and their risks after incarceration. Many women are first

entrapped into drug-related offences through manipulation, coercion, or misplaced trust, as seen in several narratives. Once convicted, these women often face offers from organized gangs who promise protection, financial support, and a sense of belonging upon their release. This creates a dangerous cycle where women who were initially accidental or peripheral actors in crime are systematically pushed into deeper and more permanent involvement in illicit networks.

This phenomenon is not limited to narcotics cases. Women imprisoned for serious offences such as murder are also identified as targets by gangs, as their incarceration marks them as "hardened" or "experienced," making them more valuable for recruitment. Importantly, it is the most vulnerable women—those with limited familial support, economic insecurity, or histories of trauma—who become primary targets for these networks. From a gendered pathways perspective, this underscores how structural inequalities and gendered vulnerabilities not only shape women's entry into crime but also expose them to cycles of exploitation even after punishment. Therefore, women whose offences are rooted in manipulation or accidental involvement must be distinguished and treated differently within the justice system, both to acknowledge their circumstances and to prevent their further entrapment in organized crime.

A woman becomes more vulnerable when she receives rejection from society for doing something that is against her gender role, or when she breaks the law and visits a police station, or even when police visit her home. I interviewed a woman who spent just 3 months in lock up and never went to prison, but the stigma she experienced is the same as shared by the six respondents I interviewed. Faiza spent 3 months in a lockup at the age of 27, for hitting a resourceful person of her village with stones, when they came to forcefully grab her piece of land.

She lived in a small village with her daughter and mother after separating from her husband. Their survival depended on a small piece of land, about three Marla, attached to their house. On that land, she grew vegetables, her only source of income, as she was neither educated nor skilled in any other profession. Without a male member in the house to support them, this land was their lifeline.

A landlord in the village wanted to buy her land, but the Price he offered was unreasonable. She refused, determined to keep the only means of living for her family. But her refusal came at a cost. One day, while she was working on her land, a group of men arrived, including the landlord's brother. They threatened

her, saying that if she didn't agree to sell, they would take the land by force and drive her out of the village. When she resisted, one of them misbehaved with her, tearing her shirt from the back. Overwhelmed with humiliation and anger, she picked up a stone and threw it, hitting the landlord's brother on the head.

That single act changed her life forever. The men immediately called the police, and an FIR for attempted murder was filed against her. She was locked up for three months. During this Time, her mother and daughter were not allowed to see her. The police threatened that she would rot in prison for the rest of her life. In her absence, the men forcefully occupied her land. The village turned against her—her family was boycotted, relatives cut ties, and she was branded a *"bad woman."*

After her release, with no land, no money, and no social support, she had no choice but to leave her village. She moved to the city with her daughter and mother. Life there was equally difficult; bills and the meager earnings from working as house help left them barely surviving. She could not afford her daughter's education, but at least she felt her daughter was safe away from the hostility of the village.

Her voice carries the weight of betrayal and injustice. Three months in lockup had cost her not only her land and dignity but also her social standing and her child's future. Even after leaving prison, the punishment never ended. Society had marked her, and survival became her only fight.

Every woman has a story of helplessness behind her actions that led to her imprisonment. Domestic violence, social context, lack of resources, gender-based violence and harassment, sexual violence, blind trust in closed relations and friendships got them into trouble. I interviewed 7 women, and 5 out of them never planned the crime; they were either caught up in it, or their lack of information about society, law, and crime got them into prison. Lack of information, financial needs, and blind trust of her husband in his friend changed the life trajectory from a simple, peaceful life to an unfamiliar, hard, and struggling life.

The narratives of incarcerated women reveal that their actions are often the outcome of long-standing abuse, coercion, and social neglect rather than purely criminal intent. These are not just stories of crime but of survival—of women pushed to their breaking point within systems that failed to protect them. Feminist criminology and gender pathways theory show us that women's routes to incarceration are deeply rooted in gendered experiences: domestic violence, emotional trauma, economic dependency, and societal silencing.

When institutions, families, and the law ignore the signs of abuse, women are left with little to no agency. In such cases, the line between victim and perpetrator becomes blurred. These women are not merely offenders; usually, most of them are survivors of chronic victimization who acted under desperation, fear, or survival instinct. To prevent such tragedies, there must be a shift from punishment to understanding and reform—through trauma-informed legal responses, early intervention, mental health support, and structural reforms that address gender inequality. Justice must recognize context, not just consequence.

Ultimately, these stories urge society to ask not just "What crime was committed?" but "What led her here?"

4.2.1 Theme 2: Trauma after Release

According to Judith Herman's Trauma theory, when a person lives in an environment that lacks meaning, control, and connection in their life, or goes through any event happening beyond their locus of control, it results in trauma. Herman's theory claims that trauma results when people feel their agency and sense of security is robbed of and every human responds different even in same traumatic situation, often leading to lack of sleep, anxiety, lack of concentration, memory loss, anger issues, exaggerated startle response like involuntary reactions to rapid movement, loud noise and unexpected touches, experiencing nightmares during sleep, lack of trust in people and becoming hyperalert. Women are reported to experience more trauma as compared to men due to their circumstances, societal pressures, and gender roles. And when a woman with a history of trauma enters prison, she has a higher likelihood of experiencing mental health issues (Moloney et al., 2009).

Zahida was 35 years old when she was imprisoned for murdering her husband. She said that her husband abused her physically and psychologically in her 20 years of marriage; she was beaten by him almost every day. She asked for help from her family members, but no one was able to assist her. She later killed her husband when he severely beat her, stripped her clothes, and made her sit naked on the stairs, open to the street. These traumatic experiences filled her heart with anger, and she killed him. She accepted that she had done wrong, but she also said that her patience had broken; she was unable to bear the pain anymore. She reported trauma when she was in prison in the form of lack of sleep, high blood pressure, and increased stress, which resulted in facial paralysis.

Zahida said,

> *"I couldn't sleep in prison, and I developed blood pressure issues. Initially, it used to remain low, and later on, I used to experience high blood pressure. I used to feel pressure in my head, a pressure I couldn't identify. I used to stress a lot, I was afraid that they had killed my brother, I was worried for my children, and I had no idea where they were and what my in-laws would have done to my family. All this stress led to facial paralysis; doctors told me that it was overwhelming stress that led to facial paralysis.*
>
> *When I came out of prison, I couldn't walk alone, I didn't step out of my home for 3 years, and I was always afraid that if I stepped out of my house, someone from my in-laws would kill me. Later, my siblings encouraged me to move out and earn a living, and they would often accompany me. Slowly, I got the confidence to move alone. To this day, I don't have friends, I don't socialize, I just go out for work, come back home, and mind my own business."*

Exposure to traumatic experiences, prolonged isolation, and violence within controlled environments has been widely associated with psychological distress, clinically conceptualized as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Belet et al., 2020). PTSD manifests in diverse forms, including heightened anxiety, social withdrawal, sleep disturbances, recurring nightmares, and depressive episodes. In Zahida's case, the aftermath of incarceration translated into psychosomatic and psychological symptoms, such as chronic insomnia, hypertension, social anxiety, and even facial paralysis. Upon release, her immediate responsibility to provide for her children left a little room for psychological recovery. Notably, she endured these conditions without professional intervention, lacking both awareness and access to mental health support. Instead, she internalized the experience, interpreting her suffering as divine retribution for the act of killing her husband. This internalization of trauma, compounded by the absence of therapeutic care, demonstrates how untreated PTSD among formerly incarcerated women persists long after the completion of their sentence, perpetuating cycles of distress and social marginalization.

Nargis, who was 32 years old at the Time of arrest, was harassed, stalked, and blackmailed by a young man in her in-laws, who was accidentally killed by her in her house as he came in forcefully and tried to impose his will upon her. She also reported trauma in the form of anxiety and lack of sleep, and later on, high blood pressure.

Nargis shared,

> "*Later, when I came back, slowly, I felt like the effects of that place stayed in my mind for at least two years. Initially, whenever I met someone, I became anxious. The thought would always come to my mind, what if they knew I was in jail? When I used to talk to people, I couldn't speak with the kind of confidence I'm speaking with now—I just couldn't. I faced so many difficulties and tensions after coming out of prison that I developed high blood pressure."*

When she was in prison, she faced difficulty sleeping, anxiety, and depression. She explained anxiety, saying,

> "At the Time of dawn, all of us used to feel anxious, my heart used to feel restless, and at that time we used to recite the Quran together until the sky became dark".

This narrative reflects the profound psychological consequences of incarceration, where imprisonment extends its impact well beyond physical confinement. Her account highlights symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress and anxiety disorders, including persistent social anxiety, loss of confidence, sleep disturbances, depression, and psychosomatic outcomes such as hypertension. The fear of social stigma—worrying that others might know about her imprisonment—demonstrates the enduring effects of labeling and internalized shame, which hinder reintegration. Moreover, her coping strategies inside prison, such as collective Quran recitation at dawn, reveal how women in carceral spaces turn to faith and solidarity to manage collective anxiety. This illustrates how incarceration for women is not only a legal punishment but also a deeply gendered and social experience, shaping their identities and health long after release.

Fakhra, who was 24 years old when she got imprisoned for 25 years and spent 12 years in prison, was in charge of hiding her husband's crime of murder. She said she had no other option but to live with her husband as she had kids with him, and her parents were not ready to support her as they knew that their son-in-law had murdered the wife of an influential person, and he would not leave anyone who would support him. Her six children were handed over to Edhi shelter home, and she said that she was unable to sleep for several nights in a row, due to stress and worries for her children. She shared that when she returned, she faced difficulties walking alone, socializing, and stepping out of her home. She narrated,

"When I came back, believe me, I was so afraid that I couldn't take a step out of my door. I couldn't cross the road; I had a fear in mind that if I crossed, some vehicle would come and pick me up. I was also afraid of people; I always used to think about what they were thinking of me when they were looking at me. I was afraid. I started forgetting things. I used to place something somewhere and then forget. I used to scold my children for missing things, and they would tell me that I forget things. Even once I entered my neighbors' thinking it was my home, I forgot my own home. My daughter called me back and asked where I was going; our house is that way. This was the level of fear and memory loss after coming back from prison. I had a constant fear in my mind if something bad happens to me again, I couldn't take a step out of my home at my own, I used to move out with my children, I avoided meeting people, my body used to shiver when I talked to someone stranger, I lost my confidence, I couldn't sleep at night, I used to fear a lot."

Fakhra and Rabail's experiences demonstrate the long-term psychological and social consequences of incarceration, particularly when intersecting with wrongful convictions and coercive practices. Fakhra's trauma manifested in hypervigilance and memory lapses, symptoms often linked to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), indicating how imprisonment sustains a constant state of fear even after release. In contrast, Rabail's transformation from a socially confident and independent woman into one consumed by anger and distrust underscores the devastating effects of state violence and betrayal by close kin. Her account highlights how wrongful conviction, compounded by police corruption, physical and psychological abuse, and abandonment by family, intensified her trauma and led to deep social withdrawal. This shift from trust and openness to isolation and resentment illustrates how women's pathways into and out of prison are profoundly shaped by intersecting structures of gendered violence, institutional injustice, and familial betrayal, leaving enduring scars on their identity and capacity for reintegration. She narrated,

"When it's Eid, I lock myself in my room. Whenever there's a celebration, I don't meet anyone."
"I don't want to meet anyone. In a way, I am angry at the world."

Kausar, a 27-year-old woman at the Time of arrest, shared that she was sitting in a car with her husband, and they were going shopping. Her husband used to go out of the city with his friend in the same vehicle. She, along with her 14-year-old little brother, sat in the car. They got caught at a police checkpoint for carrying drugs. She said I had no idea what was happening, and, in a moment, I became a criminal. She

was newly married and facing prison, just after some months of marriage, which gave her so much stress and trauma that she developed heart disease. She said,

> *"My blood pressure started staying very high; it wasn't like that before, and it still is. I also developed a heart issue while I was there. In the beginning, I couldn't sleep at all—many times it felt like life was over."*

Natasha spent 4 years in prison and was arrested when she was 28 years old. She said that she needed money, and a friend of hers offered her a job that would take her out of the city; she just had to accompany them and sit in the car with her 6-month-old child. She said she had done wrong for not considering why they were offering her money and taking advantage of her greed, even after her husband had warned her not to get too involved with the woman she called a friend. The day she got arrested, she was alone in the car with the driver, and her 'friend' was sitting in another car following them. She got arrested in charge of carrying drugs. She said she got traumatized from the event, which resulted in a lack of trust, difficulty sleeping, and constant stress resulting from the grief of separation from her children. She spoke,

> *"I used to get worried about my children, the thought that they must have been alone at home, after my husband locked them inside the home to go to work, as no one was willing to take care of my children. I used to fear every Time what if something bad happens to my children, how would I live. I experienced nightmares of my children touching the stove, putting fingers in the electric circuit, etc. There wasn't even a single minute in 4 years that I didn't yearn painfully for my children. This punishment was more severe than imprisonment. I don't trust anyone now. I suffered a lot because I trusted a friend."*

This narrative reflects severe psychological distress rooted in maternal separation anxiety, constant fear, and traumatic imagination. The woman's recurring nightmares of her children in danger reveal symptoms of intrusive thoughts and hyperarousal, common in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Her inability to stop worrying about her children over the span of four years demonstrates chronic anxiety and a state of prolonged emotional suffering, which she perceives as even more painful than incarceration itself. The loss of trust in others, particularly after betrayal by a friend, further indicates how imprisonment reinforced her feelings of vulnerability and social isolation. In conclusion, women in prison not only endure the deprivations of confinement but also face deep psychological challenges—ranging from anxiety and depression to PTSD—exacerbated by separation from their children, lack of social support, and betrayal by those they once trusted.

4.2.2. Subtheme: Psychologist Contributions

When a woman enters prison, she comes with a baggage of trauma, guilt, separation anxiety, fear of the unknown, and stigmatization. These jumbled and some unknown feelings, along with facing social injustice, abuse, poverty, and trauma, deepen her psychological wound. For her rehabilitation, it is important that she gets monitored and treated psychologically, so that she can process her behavior, do something to rebuild her confidence and self-esteem, and build a coping mechanism. Respondents reported that the Women Aid Trust (WAT) had provided them with a psychologist who would deliver lectures, and they could consult with her if they wished. Nargis said,

> *"A psychologist for an NGO used to visit us. I once asked her why this happened. It should not have happened. She explained it to me in detail, and then I understood why it happened to me."*

The presence of a single visiting psychologist is insufficient to address the complex and widespread psychological needs of incarcerated women. Effective mental health care in prisons requires the establishment of a dedicated team of psychologists who can provide continuous support through structured counseling sessions, individualized therapy, and group interventions. Additionally, incorporating recreational and rehabilitative activities is crucial for promoting emotional well-being, reducing stress, and fostering resilience among inmates. Without a comprehensive and regularized mental health support system, the psychological consequences of imprisonment—including trauma, anxiety, and depression—remain unaddressed, further hindering women's reintegration into society. As Kausar suggested,

> *"When a woman enters prison, the government should first of all train them mentally, provide mental health support, somewhat like what Women Aid Trust does. Initially, I was very scared, and I used to wander around in prison like an insane person. Then, Madam Shaheena met me, and she asked me to come out of my room, meet the people around me, and get involved in activities. She also referred me to her psychologist. I got hope after talking to her and set my direction."*

The experiences of women during incarceration and after their release reveal a deeply embedded cycle of trauma that extends far beyond prison walls. Imprisonment often strips women of their identities as mothers, caregivers, and individuals, subjecting them to institutional violence, isolation, and emotional distress. The trauma does not end upon release; most of them face intense psychological challenges as they navigate reintegration, often without social support, economic stability, or mental health care. Stigma,

separation from children, and fear of retribution further deepen their suffering, leading to long-lasting emotional scars.

The narratives of formerly incarcerated women underscore that incarceration is not just a legal punishment—it is a traumatic life event with profound mental health consequences. Therefore, any conversation about justice and rehabilitation must include trauma-informed approaches, post-release support systems, and policies that recognize the unique emotional and social needs of women. Only then can we move toward a system that truly offers recovery, healing, and a second chance.

4.3.1. Theme 3: Stigma from Society and Change of Identity

Labelling theory suggest that's once a negative label like 'criminal', 'bad woman' and 'ex-convict' is attached to a person, there are levels of deviance resulting form that labelling, at the first level the person performs an act of deviance and gets a label, but it may or may not change their self-image, but at the second level, the constant recalling attached to the label and certain behavior of society towards the person changes the person's thought process by accepting the label and acting accordingly (Becker, 2018). Women face this labelling at more intense levels as the act of deviance destroys their image as an 'obedient woman', 'a mother', 'a daughter', or 'a wife'. When the label of 'criminal' and 'ex-convicts is attached to them, it affects their acceptance and relationship building in society, which in result adds resistance to their reintegration. According to the law, their punishment or sentence ends when they step out of prison, but according to the narrative of ex-convicts, their sufferings never end, and society holds them accountable at every step of their lives and points its fingers towards them. Kausar shared,

> *"When a person has served their sentence, even God forgives them — but people do not. Still, we continue to talk about them, saying things like 'he was like this' or 'she was like that.' We should forgive. Instead, we should look at their circumstances — how they are trying to live now. If they are no longer engaging in the same behavior, if they have come out clean and are trying to lead a good life, then people shouldn't continue to criticize them. That's not right. They should be supported, encouraged, told not to go back to that life and to keep moving forward. We should uplift and strengthen such individuals."*

Kausar said that she faced criticism from society even when she changed her path and tried to live a simple and honest life. She said that people who knew about her still, when they met, made her feel ashamed and

mentioned her Time in prison directly or indirectly. She said that society punishes harder than prison, and people never forgive. Similarly, Fakhra believed society is stricter than prison. She shared that she faced more difficulties from society than from the prison and law enforcement system. She shared that people change their behavior when they come to know that she was kept in prison. They hate, disappoint, and doubt her intention and think she has learned new crimes in prison, and she will for sure harm them or anyone. Upon asking the question about the behavior of society toward her, she shared,

> *"Those who knew me, my parents, my relatives, they just cut off with us. Even now, the people who greet me with a hug, when they learn that I was once imprisoned, greet me with a handshake. This is how their behavior changes; they don't see how I talk or how I live. They just hear the word "ex-convict" and start hating, without even knowing the context. They think that I am a pro-criminal now. I must have learned new types of crimes by the Time I was in prison. I try my best to hide my past, because even today, if people around me come to know that I was imprisoned, none of my children will be able to get married in this society. Law gave me a sentence of 25 years, but society made it a lifetime for me."*

As Fakhra shared that the change of behavior of people from greeting with a hug to shaking hands after knowing a woman came from prison tells a lot that we as a society don't consider 'ex-convicts' equal. Her sharing:

> *"They consider I am a professional criminal now, as I must have learned new types of crimes in prison."*

This narrative illustrates the pervasive stigmatization that female ex-convicts face upon release, where imprisonment becomes a dominant marker of identity that overshadows their personal and social selves. Instead of being viewed as a period of repentance or rehabilitation, incarceration is constructed by society as a space where criminality is reinforced, thereby sustaining the stereotype that former prisoners are inherently deviant. As highlighted by Fakhra's account, the label of "Jail Walian" replaces their individual identity with one defined by incarceration, resulting in profound psychological and social consequences. Such labeling perpetuates feelings of shame, diminishes self-esteem, and undermines motivation, restricting their ability to reintegrate with dignity. The constant fear of being identified as an ex-convict subjects them to social surveillance, which often forces them into self-isolation and withdrawal from community life. This process reflects a cycle of exclusion, where societal attitudes not only obstruct reintegration but also risk pushing women further into marginalization and vulnerability.

Nargis explained this in her words as,

> "*Whenever I go out in gatherings, I can see suspense in people's eyes, and if someone fails to recognize me, then others recall that incident (that resulted in my imprisonment), I feel bad, I feel ashamed".*

Kausar's narrative highlights the profound social stigma that continues to shape the reintegration experiences of female ex-convicts, despite their efforts to avoid recidivism and rebuild their lives. Although she actively sought to reintegrate by engaging in multiple jobs, the persistent labeling of her identity as an "ex-convict" in professional and social spaces undermined her attempts at rehabilitation. The act of repeatedly being introduced and reminded of her imprisonment reflects a form of secondary victimization, where societal attitudes perpetuate exclusion rather than enabling transformation. Her experience underscores how stigma not only isolates women but also obstructs their motivation to sustain positive change. This case illustrates the urgent need for community sensitization and supportive workplace policies that allow ex-convicts, particularly women, to redefine their identities beyond their past and successfully reintegrate into society. She shared with pain and dissatisfaction in her voice,

> *" People think low of us because we went to prison, they carry hatred in their eyes, there is a woman in my previous office, she is from my village and I recommended her to be appointed on the post I left, although I have a good relation with her, even then every time she introduces me as ex-convicts, she calls us as 'Jail Walian' (Women that belong to prison), she announces that word loudly and says women from prison have come. Look, we have repented the day we came out, we are living on the right path, never thought of recidivism, so why do people give us such names? Every time it creates a new wound."*

The narratives reveal the deep stigma faced by female ex-convicts, where imprisonment becomes a permanent marker of identity rather than a temporary life event. Being labeled as “Jail Walian” or repeatedly introduced as an ex-convict highlight how society reduces these women to their past, disregarding their efforts to reform and reintegrate. This stigmatization erodes self-esteem, instills feelings of shame, and creates constant fear of judgment, which in turn limits their participation in social gatherings and professional spaces. As a result, rather than facilitating rehabilitation, social labeling reinforces marginalization and exclusion, making reintegration an emotionally painful and structurally challenging process for women after prison.

4.3.2. Subtheme: Labeling Leading to Deviation

Kausar said that when a woman is labelled for a crime, it becomes really hard for her to prove herself in front of society. She shared that it takes her whole life to prove her innocence and repentance. She was of the view that these labels never get separated from their identity. She shared that it frustrates them and often makes them rebellious, and mostly women who recidivate are reported to have said that they are labelled as one, so it’s better for them to remain that person rather than proving to society every moment and in return getting hardships and hatred from people.

Kausar told a story of a woman. She said,

> *"Not everyone turns to wrongdoing out of compulsion, but yes, some do. When people are constantly harassed and pushed, then after coming out of jail, they think, ‘Now that this label is on us, we might as well live like that.’ I’ve seen many say, ‘If this is how it is, then so be it.’ I told them, ‘No, you can still live a good life.’ There were so many among us whom WAT (Women Aid Trust) tried to support, but they didn’t change. One woman with us went back to Peshawar and started selling drugs again. I went to her house and told her, ‘Fear God,’ but she said, ‘In people’s eyes, I’m already a bad woman. No matter how good I try to be, I won’t be seen as good. So now, I’ll just do what they expect of me.’ She didn’t stop. Now this is where the government should have stepped into keeping an eye on her and try to help her reform."*

This narrative highlights how stigma and social labeling shape the post-prison identities of women, pushing many into a cycle of recidivism. Despite efforts by organizations like WAT to support reintegration, women often feel trapped by the perception that they are permanently "bad," which

reinforces a sense of hopelessness and resignation. The statement reflects labeling theory, where societal judgment becomes internalized, leading individuals to conform to the very deviant roles they are accused of. The example of the woman in Peshawar shows how a lack of state intervention, combined with persistent community stigma, undermines rehabilitation, leaving ex-convicts with limited choices beyond returning to crime. This underscores the need for structured governmental monitoring, psychosocial support, and community sensitization to break the cycle of marginalization and reoffending.

4.3.3. Subtheme: Relatives and friends cutting ties

Relational theory explains that female ex-convicts not just face the issues of employment and labelling, but they face additional difficulties,, like difficulty in repairing already existing social bonds or finding new, meaningful social relations (Barlow, 2014). Female ex-convicts shared that they faced a silent sentence from society in the form of social isolation as friends and relatives cut their ties with them, either from fear of association, sometimes out of shame, and due to their belief that being a woman committing a crime, they had morally deviated. Social hatred and isolation resulting from the failure of maintaining family pride make it hard to complete the sentence, as hardly anyone supports them, and after reintegration, they have to rebuild their lives on their own, without any social support to find jobs, no one to take care of their children, or to support them morally. As Kausar narrated,

> *"I maintained patience inside prison. It was just my God; no one else came to visit me or supported me. Relatives from my husband's side and from my side were fighting with each other, my relatives were blaming my husband for putting me in this situation, and my in-laws were blaming me for luring their son. As a result, our families were separated, and none of them supported us when we were in prison, and even after that.*

This social isolation not just results from hatred for deviation but also from fear of association. Even when people know that a person hasn't committed a crime, but he/she has been arrested and are going to prison, most of their friends and relatives cut their ties with them out of fear of association with a person in prison or fear of involvement in legal matters. Rabail is an example of such a case, as she had strong family ties and a close-knit friend circle before she went to prison. She belonged to a well-off family and consistently supported her friends and relatives, thanks to her financial means and generous nature. However, her family's own relatives turned their backs, and friends never contacted her again out of fear of association. She said,

"I called my in-laws and said, 'I am still your daughter. You visit your son in prison, why not me?' My home was filled with my belongings. I asked for a blanket, but they refused. 'You are no longer our daughter. You will get nothing from us,' they said. That is when they began to hate me. I thought, 'Maybe they are angry, maybe they will come around.' But when I went to see my husband, his attitude was the same. They wanted to pin the entire case on me so they could walk free. I told them, 'Go ahead, if you can get out, then do it—Allah is the ultimate judge."

She added,
"One's relatives, friends, everyone leaves your side. Those whom you trust the most, even those who say that she must have done something and hate you."

Faiza is also facing this social sentence; no one from her relatives supports her. She is raising her daughter and her elderly mother by working as a housekeeper. She had to leave her village, where they were living in their own home, and now they are living in a rented house, struggling hard to make ends meet. None of her relatives supported her. She narrated,

"When something like this happens, where a strong party is against you and you are fighting for your rights, no one comes to support you. My relative knew that it was my piece of land, and I had the right to speak against that illegal capture. I fought with them for my rights, but instead they put wrong charges against me and put me in prison. To date, not even a single person from my relatives or village has reached out to me or tried to help me. I am all alone, striving to survive on a daily basis."

Nargis also shared that most of her relatives boycotted her, and the rest of them changed their behavior. She shared,

"My relatives from the side of my mother and father totally boycotted us, and people used to say that I would rot in prison for the rest of my life. I used to ignore what they said. When I came back from prison, I gradually stopped attending gatherings and social events. People used to talk about me; they would look at me from a distance and discuss me in groups. No one met me the same as before."

Fakhra experienced social cutoff, even from her parents; her husband was involved in the murder of the wife of a resourceful person. When she shared with her parents, they totally boycotted her out of fear of association and getting dragged into the case. They had little to no resources to support her against a

wealthy opponent. Even though they refused to take care of her children, she told me that her 6 children were handed to an Edhi shelter home, and no one came to visit her from her in-laws or from her parents. She narrated,

> *"I had just one friend before this incident, and she never came to help, obviously, how could she help, when my blood relatives left me alone, why would she come to help? She had a family to take care of. When I shared my misery with my parents, they totally cut off their ties with me. I guess they were thinking that their other children, who are married and settled, their lives will be affected, or society will cut their ties with them. Anyhow, I don't know why they cut their ties. I tried to reconnect even after coming back from prison, but my mother still refused to talk to me, and none of my siblings responded positively. Then I also stopped contacting them, as I had my children and focused on them. There was just one man, 'Edhi Sir', who took care of my children and brought them from Lahore to Rawalpindi to every meeting. I will never forget what he did for me when I was in a difficult situation."*

Social support has a primary role in reintegration, especially for women. It gives them courage and hope to start a new life. Fakhra couldn't get that support, which added to her miseries. But cases like of Zahida where her family and relatives fully supported her from the point she got arrested by taking care of her children behind her, to legally supporting her and meeting her regularly in prison, to the point of reintegration, by living with her, supporting her morally and financially, she was never alone at any step, set an example that how social ties help in reintegration and keeps women more motivated and positive. She told that,

> *"My paternal cousins never leave my side, they came all the way from abroad to defend my case legally, they hired a lawyer for me, they took care of my children, provided whatever I need in prison, and my family was there at every step, I will always be thankful to them, today my children are educated, married and settled in their lives, it would not have been possible without their support."*

This account illustrates the profound difference that family and social support can make in an ex-prisoner's reintegration, and by contrast, what is lost when social connections are cut off. For many women, imprisonment leads to abandonment by relatives, loss of social networks, and severed community ties, which intensify stigma and hinder their ability to rebuild their lives. Without support, they struggle with childcare, financial survival, and emotional well-being, often pushing them back into marginalization or recidivism. In contrast, the narrator's experience shows how consistent familial backing—legal, financial, and emotional—can protect women from the harsh effects of incarceration, ensure stability for their children, and allow them to re-enter society with dignity. Thus, social cutoff not only isolates women but also perpetuates cycles of poverty and crime, while strong social bonds act as a protective factor for successful rehabilitation.

4.3.4. Subtheme: Stigma of Moral Deviation and Loss of Dignity in Prison

Respondents reported that they faced the added stigma of being associated with immoral activities, especially of a sexual nature, either by choice or by force. This conservative notion, which makes the title of 'criminal' inseparable from the title of 'bad character,' makes their lives more difficult and doubles the consequences for them. Jasmine, when she found out that she was getting imprisoned, attempted suicide out of fear of her character being affected in prison. She said,

> *"First, people used to scare me a lot that in prison they ruin the respect of women (sexual abuse). It happens, policemen ... (she preferred silence rather than using the word). This happens, that happens. One day, I thought of hanging myself from the fan and dying. The respect and dignity for which I endured so much, if I am going to lose it in prison, then what is the point of living?*

Kausar, who always practiced patience and considered her imprisonment as destiny, broke down when her mother had a heart attack upon hearing the news of her arrest, out of fear of losing her daughter's dignity. While crying, she said,

> *"My mother got so sad, she had a heart attack, when she heard about us that we couldn't get out of prison. She used to ask my brothers to get me out of prison, because I am a woman and nothing should happen to me.*

She added,

“I lived with honesty and patience. Initially, it was really hard for me to gather patience. I wished to die, but later, when I observed prison and its environment, I found some home. Believe me, when people used to sleep at night, I used to sit in the corridor on the cold floor and used to cry and pray at night and ask Allah that whenever He gets me out of here (prison), I must get out of here clean and characterful” (pitch of voice got high and she started trembling and crying).

Rabail and her husband both got imprisoned. But her husband assassinated her character and divorced her to get help in prison from an unknown person, whom she didn’t know well. She said,

"When I saw my husband’s attitude, I realized he had started defaming me. You know, nothing like that happens in jail (referring to sexual misconduct). But he accused me— ‘You must be like this, you don’t get visitors, your so-called friends must be sending things for you.’ I told him, ‘I have no friends. And the man who helped me—I already told you—he helps everyone.’"

This narrative exposes how imprisonment intensifies gendered vulnerabilities, particularly through the weaponization of suspicion and honor by intimate partners. The woman’s husband projects stigma onto her by accusing her of sexual misconduct, reflecting how incarceration often intersects with cultural notions of morality and female respectability. Even without evidence, the label of being “a jail woman” fuels mistrust, leading to defamation and emotional abuse at home. Her insistence that supports she received was not personal but communal reveals her attempt to defend her dignity against such accusations. This highlights how women face a “double punishment”: one from the justice system and another from patriarchal structures that question their character, undermining their reintegration and eroding familial trust. Kausar, she said,

"I couldn’t talk to my family. No one came to see me from home. Both our families were fighting with each other. My mother came once—she cried so much. That day, I felt like the ground should split open and I should just disappear into it (she said this while crying). I couldn’t bear to see my mother and brothers come here (prison). Because of one careless mistake on our part, both families lost their honor. They were humiliated so badly because of us. We had to end up in a place like jail."

The stigma of moral deviation and loss of dignity in prison reflects how incarceration, particularly for women, extends beyond the deprivation of liberty to a profound assault on identity and social worth. Women prisoners are often perceived not only as lawbreakers but also as violators of moral and gendered

expectations, with their dignity questioned through accusations of sexual misconduct, dishonor, and "bad womanhood." Such labeling persists after release, where reintegration is hindered by entrenched stereotypes that equate imprisonment with moral corruption. This dual marginalization—legal and social—creates a cycle of exclusion, reinforcing patriarchal controls and limiting opportunities for rehabilitation. Thus, prison stigma operates as both a structural and cultural barrier, requiring academic and policy attention to address the intersection of gender, morality, and justice in reintegration processes.

4.3.5 Sub-theme: Stigma leading to Divorce:

Patriarchy is deeply rooted in our society, which demands purity and honor from women (Nigam, 2014). When this 'honor' is affected and when society refuses to accept a woman coming from prison or associated with any crime, regardless of the reason behind that, in most cases, the marriage of a female ex-convict ends in divorce. Either in-laws pressurize husbands to divorce, or he distances himself out of fear of 'shame', dishonor, and loss of respect from society. Rabail had a love marriage, but that marriage ended in divorce. When she was telling, there was pain of disappointment, betrayal, and sadness in her voice. She said,

> "I *had a love marriage, and for that marriage I waited for 10 years. But that marriage ended in a divorce because of this incident.*"

Kausar was newly married when she got arrested. She said that her parents and relatives pressured her to get a divorce from her husband out of fear of association, and when she refused, she suffered because she did not get any help from her relatives. She said,

> *"When this incident happened, my relatives and my family pressured me to get a divorce, but I didn't."*

Fakhra faced prison for 12 years (sentenced for 25 years), in charge of not speaking out and staying with her husband, knowing that he had committed murder. She said that no one was willing to let her, and her children stay with them, not even her parents, as her husband had murdered the wife of an influential person, and everyone knew whoever assisted them would face trouble. She said she had no other option but to stay with her husband, who claimed that it was an accidental murder as he aimed to throw the saw out of anger at the wall, but it missed the target and hit her own wife. She ran away with her husband; they were hiding in different places. When they got arrested, she and her husband were sentenced equally to 25 years. The custody of their six children was given to Edhi home, as no one from their relatives and

friends dared to help them or their children out of fear. But her husband started neglecting her in prison and spent all his money and resources on his bail. When she spoke up and asked him to save that money for their children, he started ignoring her and put all the blame for their arrest on her. She shared that he used to tell her that she was the reason for their arrest, as she must have shared their location with someone. Later on, he divorced her out of anger or out of shame that his wife was in prison; she said she was not sure why he divorced her. She said, in all that mattered, she was the one who suffered the most, and at what cost? She uttered, “divorce”. She shared,

"When I saw my husband’s attitude, I realized he had started defaming me. You know, nothing like that happens in jail (referring to sexual misconduct). But he accused me, ‘You must be like this, you don’t get visitors, your so-called friends must be sending things for you.’ I told him, ‘I have no friends. And the man who helped me—I already told you—he helps everyone.’"
"When a woman marries for love, I think nothing else remains important in her life. And when she is wrongfully accused of something, what is left after that?"

Labeling has a profound and lasting impact on the lives of ex-convicts, often perpetuating a cycle of marginalization, stigma, and limited opportunities. Once labeled as "criminals," individuals face significant barriers to reintegration, including challenges in securing employment, housing, and social acceptance. This societal rejection not only hampers their ability to rebuild their lives but can also lead to recidivism, as the lack of support reinforces feelings of hopelessness and exclusion. To break this cycle, it is essential to shift public perception, implement fair rehabilitation policies, and promote inclusive practices that recognize the potential for change and growth in every individual. Reducing the harmful effects of labeling is not only a matter of justice for ex-convicts—it is a step toward a safer, more equitable society.

Social cut-off severely affects incarcerated women, often compounding the trauma that may have led to their imprisonment in the first place. Women in prison frequently face a double burden: the emotional isolation from broken family ties and the societal stigma that distances them from meaningful relationships and support systems. These weakened social connections not only increase vulnerability to mental health issues but also hinder successful reintegration upon release. Research and theories like Barlow’s Relational Theory emphasize that strong, supportive relationships are essential for women to rebuild their identity, heal from past trauma, and avoid recidivism. Therefore, policies and practices that promote the

preservation and restoration of social ties—such as family-centered prison programs, community support networks, and relational counseling—are not just rehabilitative strategies but essential components of justice. Rebuilding relationships is not only a personal need for women in prison; it is a societal responsibility critical to breaking cycles of incarceration and enabling true reintegration.

4.4.1. Theme 4: Financial Issues

Every woman, when she comes out of prison, faces financial issues; there are a number of factors behind that. Respondents shared that during and after arrest, their personal belongings were either hijacked by the people behind them or police took them away in the process of search. After that, to defend their cases and to pay fines, the money they need comes from selling gold or property like houses and land, or by taking loans. This leaves them in a crisis that they have to face even after they come back. As Nargis said,

> *"We were burdened with debts when I came back from prison, training doesn't get us anything if we don't have money."*

She said that she had to sell her gold jewelry to pay a fine. She had nothing in her hand to support herself and her children after coming back. She narrated,

> "*I had a lot of gold—about 4 or 6 bangles, 2 bracelets, necklace sets, lockets, rings, and even earrings and all. But my husband, in a rush, sold everything for around one or one and a half lakh rupees to fight the case. After that, I had to face his indifference and so many major problems... After my arrest, whoever came to my house would just take whatever they liked. They emptied my whole house behind my back."*

Nargis explained this instability and lack of finance, creating furthermore issues in detail upon asking the question about the biggest issue in her life. She answered,

> *"I feel like the biggest issue in life is not having money. When you can't fulfill the basic needs of your household, when you have to get by with tears and struggle every day, it's really hard. If you have money, so many problems can be solved.*

Nargis shared that she was well settled before she went to prison; they had their own house, and in that house, she had everything of daily use. She also shared that she had a good amount of gold jewelry in terms of savings. She said that they were living a simple, happy, and peaceful life, but all of a sudden, a

young man in her in-laws started liking her and stalked her everywhere she went and blackmailed her for not getting into a relationship with him. He was killed in her home. He pointed a gun at her to pressure her, and in the moment of snatching that gun, he was shot in the head and died at the spot. She said that this incident changed her life completely. She got imprisoned, and to get out of prison, they had to sell their property and her gold jewelry. Her house was almost empty when she came back. They had to start from scratch as all their savings were spent on getting her out of prison. She said that they are still struggling due to the loss they faced when she was in prison. She narrated,

"If I hadn't gone to jail, I would've been earning more today. The reason is, we were set, you know?

When your parents arrange your marriage, they basically set you up. You get everything from both sides—a home, household items, and you only have to live your life. Just eat and live, isn't it? You can manage that. You don't have to worry about buying a bed, or furniture, or setting up a place—your parents have already done all that, from both sides.

Now, I don't have my own beauty parlor. I work for someone else. That's my problem now. At the very least, you need 200,000 rupees to open a decent parlor—just a clean, basic setup, you know? All I can earn is around 20,000 rupees by working under someone, which isn't enough to bring up 5 children. The house I live in now is rented. My own house was sold off while fighting my legal case. I bought this velvet suit I'm wearing three years ago for 1500 rupees. I got it stitched back then. The hem had worn out, so I cut it and fixed it. The sleeves were torn too—I removed them and got new ones stitched on." (She smiles, trying to hide her tears.)

"Often, when I've gone to work at a parlor, I've seen that the clothes and shoes of the maids working in those homes are better than mine. But I've never let anyone feel that. I give courage to everyone and tell myself that what I'm wearing is better than all of theirs."

The woman's reflection highlights the economic and social dislocation that incarceration produces, particularly for women in patriarchal, resource-constrained societies. Her comparison between a pre-incarceration life framed as "set" through parental marriage arrangements and her present situation underscores the rupture in socioeconomic security caused by imprisonment. The parental arrangement of marriage is described not only as a cultural practice but as a form of economic provisioning, where

material security (home, furniture, dowry items) guarantees a baseline of stability. The loss of this security through incarceration illustrates how prison disrupts family-based social capital (Bourdieu, 1986), leading to long-term precarity.

Her inability to establish her own parlor despite skills and experience reveals structural barriers to reintegration, such as a lack of capital, stigma, and depleted assets (her house was sold to cover legal expenses). This situation reflects a cycle of economic marginalization where women, after prison, often end up in subordinate or underpaid roles despite possessing entrepreneurial capacities. The reference to her earnings (20,000 rupees) against the cost of living for five children illustrates the gendered dimension of economic survival, where women's incomes remain undervalued and insufficient in meeting household needs.

The narrative also reveals the intersection of material deprivation and identity management. Her account of wearing an old suit, patched and re-stitched, and her observation that even domestic workers are better dressed, show how clothing becomes a marker of social status and exclusion. Yet, her conscious performance of dignity, "I've never let anyone feel that"—demonstrates strategies of emotional resilience and impression management. Smiling while recounting her struggles represents an attempt to preserve self-respect and agency despite visible signs of poverty.

Those respondents who were not supported by family or friends said that their house was empty when they came back. This loss of physical belongings, along with a lack of support and emotional turmoil, multiplied their sufferings. Starting their life from the lack of basic necessities made them feel more abandoned and helpless. Nargis said that her main concern is the absence of money, which is the root of all of her problems. She narrated.

> "*I think the biggest problem in life is the absence of money, when basic necessities of one's family, you have to make both ends meet with lots of difficulties, but if you have money, many of the issues in life could be fixed. If I hadn't been in jail, I would have been earning more today.*

When she recalls her past, her words linger on the sense of stability she once had. *"We were set in our lives,"* she says, describing how marriage had secured her foundation. In her world, the parents' contributions at marriage—homes, furniture, and all the necessities of everyday living—were not simply

gifts but guarantees of stability. She did not have to think about whether there would be a bed to sleep on or utensils for daily use; these were the markers of security that anchored her family.

That stability, however, was shattered during her imprisonment. While she served her sentence, her husband became involved in an extramarital relationship with one of her closest friends. The betrayal was not only emotional but financial. The friend, whom she believed would care for her children, turned them against her and occupied her home. For one and a half years, she lived there, stripping it of valuables. *"I had a fully furnished home,"* she recalls bitterly, *"but when I returned, there was nothing but a few basic things of everyday use."*

Her story is not just one of personal betrayal; it illustrates how incarceration leaves women financially vulnerable in ways that extend beyond the prison walls. Female ex-convicts often face asset depletion, their homes, savings, or possessions lost during the period of imprisonment, whether through legal costs, neglect, or exploitation by those they once trusted. The absence of stable property or capital at the point of reintegration means they re-enter society at a severe economic disadvantage.

Moreover, this financial vulnerability is compounded by their gender position. Women in patriarchal contexts often rely on family and marital networks for stability. When these networks fracture through abandonment, betrayal, or stigma, women have little economic independence to fall back on. The loss of her home and possessions forced her into a life of financial precarity, echoing a broader pattern: imprisonment does not merely punish individuals; it destabilizes their economic foundations, often leaving them dependent on low-paying work and struggling to rebuild security for themselves and their children. Her story demonstrates how the intersection of incarceration, gender, and betrayal magnifies the financial difficulties female ex-convicts face. The cost is not only counted in rupees or lost assets but also in the stripping away of stability and dignity once considered guaranteed.

Fakhra also faced the problem of starting life from scratch. She got arrested with her husband, and her children were handed over to the Edhi home. The home they had left behind was rented, and she said that the police took most of their goods in front of their eyes, and when she came back, they got nothing. She said that she had everything in her house, but when she came back from prison, they had nothing, and, in

their case, she said that the police took everything, even her clothes. She shared with extreme sadness and helplessness in her voice.

"*I had a house full of every day-use items, including a fridge, a TV, and all furniture. I didn't need to ask anyone for anything; even if someone asked for help, I was able to. The police took everything away in our absence, not just that, at the Time of arrest, they took some items in front of my eyes. I had a glass that I used to collect money that my husband used to give me for expenses. They took that in front of my eyes when I asked why they were taking it. They said, "It's a part of the search, it happens like that." When I came back 6 years ago, my children had just some clothes, 2-3 plates, and cups. Even my clothes were not there. We had to buy everything again and start from zero."*

When she came back, she lacked support from society, relatives, and family members, even her husband, who divorced her while she was in prison. Her eldest son rented a room, and they started life from nothing in hand. She said she has been facing financial hardships since she got imprisoned. She shared with an intense pain in her voice that her youngest son, who was 4 years old at the Time of arrest, had to work in a shop to earn, she said she felt so helpless, that the childhood of her innocent children got ruined in front of her eyes. She narrated.

"When someone doesn't have money, then there are just problems. When I got out of prison, my eldest son got leave from Edhi home and rented a room, where I started living with my children. All of my sons couldn't get education as they had to work because both of their parents were in prison, my youngest son was 4 years old when he started working as a helper in a shop, and you know how small a 4 year old looks like (she gestured with her hand to show how small a four year looks, Her voice softened, and her eyes welled up as she did so—there was a mix of longing, guilt, and heartbreak in her expression. It was a simple gesture, but it carried the weight of separation, missed milestones, and a deep maternal pain. Her hand paused in the air for a moment, as if holding the memory of a child she couldn't hold in real life, and my eldest son was 7 years old when he started working. 3 of my sons collectively earn around 35 thousand, and our expenses exceed the earnings, so I stitch clothes along with my daughters to make ends meet. We have been facing financial issues ever since I got imprisoned."

Rabail faced a sudden fall from living a luxurious life where she had her own car and her own home filled with every possible basic and luxurious item, to not even having a hundred-rupee note in her hands. She

was living with her in-laws, told that she had everything in her house, her parents gave her everything and even gave her extra items for everyday use, but when she got arrested and asked for a blanket, they replied with rudeness, and she was homeless when she came back as her step uncles had taken over her maternal property and her in-laws abandoned her and her husband divorced her. She shared her disguise with hopelessness in her voice,

> *"My home was filled with my belongings. I asked for a blanket, but they refused. 'You are no longer our daughter. You will get nothing from us."*
> *"I called my in-laws and said, 'I am still your daughter. You visit your son in prison, why not me?' My home was filled with my belongings. I asked for a blanket, but they refused. 'You are no longer our daughter. You will get nothing from us,' they said. That is when they began to hate me. I thought, 'Maybe they are angry, maybe they will come around.' But when I went to see my husband, his attitude was the same. They wanted to pin the entire case on me so they could walk free. I told them, 'Go ahead, if you can get out, then do it—Allah is the ultimate judge."*

Rabail shared that not just did she endure abandonment from her in-laws and lose her paternal property, but she also got tortured and looted by the police. Like Zubaida, Rabail also faced police brutality, and she lost her precious jewelry and household items at the hands of the police. She shared,

> *"At that Time, I had no money; the police took everything. The officers at the station completely ransacked my home. Even now, if I mention that officer's name, he won't find a place in his grave."*
> *"All my family members were in jail. My jewelry was ripped from my ears, my bangles were pulled off so violently (gestures), and I never got them back. This happened when I was arrested."*
> *"So much was taken from things I never imagined parting within my life, yet I gave them away. Just in hopes that they would let me go. 'Give this up, and we'll release you,' they said. 'Take it' (extends hands as if handing over something), just let me go."*

Police brutality at the Time of arrest and getting jewelry from women and not giving back, shows that police have the potential to exploit citizens when they are vulnerable. Kausar also shared that her gold jewelry was taken by the police, which they never returned. She narrated,

> *"I had some jewelry — bangles, and they made me take everything off, saying they would collect and keep it. Female constables arrived. I was kept at the police station for 2–3 days. Whenever someone*

asked, we were just given assurances that they would release us after keeping us at the station for a few days."

Kausar, although she was working along with her husband and was satisfied with her life, shared that she faced hardships when her husband underwent surgery. She compared it with her life before going to prison and said it would have been easier for her to deal with difficult times if she had never been to prison. She narrated,

"All thanks and praise to God, we are living fine, but 2 years back, when my husband's eye was operated on, we didn't have more than 5 to 10 thousand rupees, that was all we could save at that Time for good or bad times. But when such a big problem arises, like his operation, we had to face a lot of problems and hardships as he was hospitalized, and we didn't have enough money. It wouldn't have been like this if we hadn't been in prison. Before prison, we had savings which we had to use to pay the fine."

Faiza, who is living with her aged mother and daughter, shared that she is also facing financial issues, from the moment she got arrested till now. She compared her life before and after prison and said that they were living peacefully before prison, in their village, in their own house, working on the piece of land which she defended and got imprisoned, was giving enough money to live a respectable living. Now she is living in a rented house, working at people's homes, and surviving on her little earnings and her mother's pension of 20 thousand rupees. She narrated.

"Today, the biggest problem in my life is related to financial matters. I earn by working at people's homes, and I earn around 15 to 20 thousand rupees. My mother gets a pension from the government 20 thousand. We pay twelve thousand dollars in rent and groceries; bills and other expenses exceed our earnings. At the end of every month, I have to get a loan, or to cut our spending, I get food from the people sharing charity at the mosque or a shrine. I cannot afford my daughter's education, which I feel really sad about. When I think of our old days in our village, they were far better than they are now; we had our own house, our own community. I used to sow the land for which I fought and got imprisoned, we were living peacefully, there wasn't a single night we slept on an empty stomach, the old days were good."

The narratives collectively reveal how imprisonment generates a deep rupture in women's economic security, leaving them in cycles of financial precarity that persist long after their release. Across cases,

women lost their most critical assets—homes, jewelry, property, and savings—through a combination of legal costs, police exploitation, and betrayal by relatives or spouses. Gold jewelry, which in South Asian societies often functions as women's only form of liquid savings and economic autonomy, was repeatedly sold, confiscated, or stolen, leaving them with nothing to rebuild upon. Once released, women found themselves starting from "zero," dependent on low-paying, insecure jobs, often while raising children alone. This loss is not only material but also structural: the dowry, homes, and property once provided through marriage or inheritance (forms of economic and social capital in Bourdieu's terms) were stripped away, destabilizing the very foundations of their social and financial security.

Moreover, these women's struggles highlight the gender dimensions of punishment and reintegration. Betrayals by spouses, abandonment by in-laws, and stigmatization by communities compounded the loss of assets, showing how women are doubly penalized first by the State through incarceration, and second by patriarchal family structures that withdraw support in times of vulnerability. Their reflections repeatedly return to the centrality of money as the basis for dignity, stability, and survival, underscoring how financial insecurity becomes the greatest and most enduring consequence of imprisonment. Together, these accounts illustrate that incarceration for women is not a discrete event but, in most cases, a lifelong economic sentence, where financial struggles, debt, and loss of autonomy are carried as enduring forms of punishment long after their release.

4.5.1. Theme 5: Dissatisfaction with the Criminal Justice System

Almost all of the respondents, when asked, said what they think about the criminal justice system in Pakistan. They responded with mere dissatisfaction. They mentioned bias, unjust, and unfair treatment they experienced at different stages of their incidents. Nargis said,

> *"There isn't any justice in our justice system."*
> *When I asked her why, she said that.*
> *She replied,*
> *"I said that because in my case, what was my mistake? This is what I didn't have an extramarital affair with my stalker (in a sarcastic tone)?*

Her claim that *"there isn't any justice in our criminal justice system" comes from her personal experience of being treated unfairly at different stages of her incident, starting from the reporting mechanism that*

gets affected by stigma, as a woman going to the police station carries a huge stigma in our society. Adding upon that, if she reports a guy from her in-laws, her relations with her family and her husband's dignity can both be affected. To avoid all this mess, she just told her husband and her father-in-law, and they neglected it as well, because it was not that serious in their eyes, as the guy grew up in front of them, and they considered it a prank. In the second stage, when he invaded her boundaries by forcefully coming to her room and imposing his will upon her, she said she was still thinking of people and her husband's respect at that moment. People will say Why did she let him into their house. Her words, "*In that moment, all I could think was: If he kills himself in our home, how will I ever live down the shame? What will people say? They'll blame me. They'll say I must have encouraged him somehow. After all, no one becomes obsessed with a woman like that without a reason, right?"* Even in the moment of extreme stress where her life was at stake, she was thinking about the stigma attached to the incident, instead of thinking about saving her life. If there had been safe mechanisms for reporting harassment, this would never have happened. The incident occurred around twenty years ago, at that time women had few options to report, and the stigma attached with such incidents was a hundred times more than it is today, but even today, when there are mechanisms to report cyber-crimes, harassment, and stalking, still women either are not aware of it, or they fear the stigma attached to it.

In the second stage, when the guy was killed in her own home, she couldn't defend herself as her husband asked her to leave the house immediately and sent her to her parents, and when she got arrested, she says her trials were not fair. She was accused of killing the guy, when she told it was an accident, and the guy invaded her territory and forced her to be with him. When she refused, he took the gun out to harass her. She said no one believed her. Here she said it was the responsibility of the criminal justice system to protect her, but she was imprisoned under a death sentence, the criminal justice system ignored her circumstances, her children, her life as a woman, and she had to suffer, and she still is facing the setbacks she got from getting imprisoned.

The criminal justice system is not just confined to court hearings and sentencing; it involves maintaining law and order, crime prevention, investigation and detection of crime, prosecution and offenders, fair trial and adjudication, sentencing and punishment, rehabilitation and reintegration, victim support and advocacy(Siegel & Worrall, 2017). When a person blames the criminal justice system, it means there is something wrong at any stage of the criminal justice system. Respondents were not satisfied with our

criminal justice system because they stated that when they came into direct contact with it, they found it to be based on lies, false verdicts, and deception. Rabail, who was living a beautiful life filled with all types of luxuries and happiness, became a victim of the dark side of our criminal justice system, where the police used the loopholes in our system. Where the evidence provided by the police is considered reliable, the police can investigate anyone without the presence of their lawyer. This loophole creates a space for corruption, fabrication of false evidence, and misuse of power. Rabail, who was trapped in her stepfather's murder case, was forced through violence and harassment to accept all the charges against her. She was really disappointed with the Police and our criminal justice system. She said with mere disappointment and anger that,

> *"Our justice system is not fair, they twist the truth into lies, and lies are proven as truth, there is no justice, a very few innocent people can prove themselves, and upon that, they take time, cases are delayed. Justice should be provided in time; women should not be immediately put into prison. They should check first why she did it. What compelled her to do this? A woman's dignity gets ruined, which can never be regained."*

Her words, saying "justice should be provided in time, and women should not be immediately put into prison," explain the problem attached to our criminal justice system. When a woman is initially thrown in prison and later proven innocent by the courts, the removal of the charge becomes useless for her. When she enters prison or even the police visit her home for investigation, her place in society changes and adds difficulties to her survival. That's why women refrain from reporting most of the time, as the police behavior is not always helpful, and when a woman comes under investigation, society blames her for committing that crime even when she has not done it.

Faiza's story explains that well when she just spent a week in lockup, but she got the same rejection from society as other female inmates got for life, and her family is suffering along with her proves that women's reputation is fragile, and their survival is totally dependent on their reputation in society, and our criminal justice system needs to make laws accordingly.

Feminist criminology claims that women are less violent than men in most cases, and when they commit a crime, it is necessary to consider their circumstances, and they should not be given the same treatment as men (Barlow, 2014; Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004). Fakhra complained about the justice system not

being fair to her; she accepted her mistake for remaining silent about her husband's crime, but all she did was for her children. But in the end, she got a sentence equal to that of her husband's and ended up getting separated from her children, and in the end, her husband divorced her as well for getting imprisoned.

She said,

> *"I accept that I did wrong by hiding my husband's crime of murdering someone; at that time, all I thought of was my children. I accept that those who accompany someone in a crime or hide someone's crime are accountable towards the law, but should they be sentenced the same as the one who committed the crime? I didn't know when my husband attempted murder, nor did I plan it; I just hid it, and in the end, I got sentenced to 25 years. My children were handed to Edhi home. Was that fair to me?"*

Women in our society are treated differently based on their gender and their identity, which often results in marginalization (Crenshaw, 1991). There are certain roles assigned to their gender and their role as caregivers, either as mothers, daughters, wives, or sisters, that tie them in different chains of responsibilities, which not only restricts them from committing violent crimes but also makes them extra careful and sensitive (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004). So, when women are not treated well, equally, or fairly in our society, then treating them equally in the criminal justice system is also unfair. Fakhra's grievance is fair here. Why is a man committing murder and a woman staying silent on that and living with him out of dependency and fear of her children being left abandoned, given the same sentence? This is harmful both for the woman and her children; their circumstances must have been considered, and she should have been sentenced in another way, either through house arrest, community service, or imposing a fine on her, as is practiced worldwide (Prison Reform Trust, 2013).

4.5.2. Subtheme: Police Behavior at the Time of Investigation and Arrest:

Police deal with the accused when a crime is reported. The women that I interviewed reported either misconduct or authoritative behavior at the time of the investigation. They are reported to take valuable things like gold in the name of a search and then never give them back to them. Some of them reported harassment and demand for bribery from the police. Kausar said,

> *"I had jewelry, earrings, and other items; they made me take it all off, saying they would collect and keep everything. Female constables had arrived. I was kept at the police station for 2–3 days, and*

whenever we asked anything, they would just reassure us, saying we would be kept at the station for a few days and then released. I didn't get back any of my belongings when I came out of prison."

Rabail faced brutality and extreme mistreatment by police; they harassed her verbally, psychologically, and humiliated her in front of male members of the police. She said,

"When my stepfather died, everything had been planned—every accusation was placed on me. And when I was arrested… when a woman's clothes are at stake, she says No matter what happens, just don't take my clothes off. She becomes willing to admit to anything. I was the one nominated in that case. At that time, I had no money, and everything was taken by the police. The officers at the police station completely ruined my home. I still say, if I take that man's name (the investigation officer) even now, he wouldn't find a place in his grave."

Her voice broke as she pieced together the fragments of her past. The police had not only taken her freedom but also her dignity, her belongings, and her sense of safety. *"All my family members were in jail,"* she began. *"My jewelry was ripped from my ears, my bangles were pulled off so violently, and I never got them back. This happened when I was arrested."* What should have been an impartial investigation quickly turned into an ordeal of violence and exploitation. They blackmailed her, promising release in exchange for valuables. Desperate to be free, she handed over the only possessions she had left. *"So much was taken from me, things I could never have separated from in my life, I gave them up. Just to be released, I said, 'Okay, take this, just let me go. Take it… just let me go.'"* Yet, the release never came. Her ordeal only deepened. She was tortured, beaten, and humiliated, forced into a confession she never wanted to give. *"Fine, let's say I committed ten murders. Just shoot me! When you've already decided that I did it, you are pushing me to the point where I might as well admit it,"* she cried, recalling how they pulled her long hair from the roots until the agony became unbearable. The threat of sexual violence loomed constantly over her: *"Now imagine ten men standing in front of a woman, saying they will strip her, do whatever they want, burn her body with cigarettes. Of course, that woman will say, 'Yes, I have committed ten murders.'"* Her tears, her trembling voice, and her words, *"Why accuse someone of something they never did?"* capture the helplessness of a woman cornered by a system designed to break rather than protect.

Her story illustrates a broader pattern of institutionalized abuse within policing, where confession is extracted not through evidence but through coercion, intimidation, and violence. The removal of jewelry and valuables demonstrates the economic exploitation of detainees by law enforcement, while the threats of sexual assault reveal how women's bodies become targets of control and humiliation. Such practices align with what scholars identify as the criminalization of vulnerability, where women without protection from family or community are most exposed to police brutality. Instead of upholding justice, the police here function as agents of extortion and fear, reinforcing mistrust between marginalized citizens and State institutions. This narrative shows how, for women, the boundary between policing and persecution collapses: the very institution tasked with protecting them becomes the source of their deepest trauma.

Fakhra also reported this mistreatment at the hands of the police. She spoke

> *"Our television, and some more things of value, were taken by the police in front of our eyes at the Time of our arrest. We were living in a rented house when my husband and I got arrested, and our children were sent to Edhi Shelter. Nothing remained in our house. I used to save money in a glass, and they took that too. Upon asking, they said it's done in search. They took everything, even my clothes were not there or handed to me or my husband."*

Police brutality, harassment, and plunder, as narrated by the respondents, become the first point of violence from the institutions of criminal justice systems and reinforce the critique from feminist criminology that the criminal justice system, rather than treating women with care and sensitivity, becomes another place of humiliation and gender control. Rabail, Fakhra, and Kausar are just some examples where police took advantage of their vulnerability. This xenocentric behavior of police towards civilians in their daily practices of considering themselves superior to other people of society, their routine tactics of exercising power over marginalized people of society, and showing colonial roots of arrogance in police institutionalized brutality (Khan et al., 2023). What happened to Rabail from the point she got arrested to harassment, plunder, and emotional, physical, and sexual violence at the hands of police ruined her life forever. There must be a reporting mechanism, and no male police officer should be allowed to investigate a woman in the absence of a lawyer.

4.5.3 Subtheme: Lack of Knowledge of Legal Matters

One of the major reasons shared by all respondents for getting caught, involved in a crime, or getting trapped in it was their lack of information about legal matters. Usually, women in our society are so invested in responsibilities as daughters, wives, mothers, and sisters that they get little to no time to acquire knowledge about legal matters (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004). Even most of our educated women lack information about legal matters until they are involved in them. Our social media and mainstream media focus more on entertainment rather than information, which also keeps women less informed about legal procedures. Mostly out of care or out of fear, women are deliberately kept unaware of legal matters to stop them from empowerment and to keep them involved in gender roles.

Kausar got arrested; she shared that she didn't even know what she was getting arrested for, or that sitting in the car of her husband's friend could put her in prison. Even after watching the police, she couldn't guess that they were being arrested. She said,

"At the check post, I had no idea what was happening. My younger brother was innocent; he didn't understand what was going on. Even I couldn't have imagined that something like this could happen — we had just gone out for shopping. We were shocked, just staring at them, and they said to us, 'You knew everything."

This lack of information not just harmed her at the time of arrest but also kept adding to her trouble during incarceration. Police didn't tell her the truth about how long she would remain in prison, and her fellows kept guessing on their own and spread misinformation, increasing her fears and anxiety. She shared,

"Until I was shifted to jail, they didn't even tell us that we were going to be arrested, or that I would end up spending four years there. When I was finally transferred to jail, they said, 'You'll get bail after three months, and then we'll take you back.' We didn't understand anything, we didn't even know what '9C' meant. They said that Section 9C had been applied, and that it's related to narcotics, right? My husband didn't know either. So, they shifted me there first. A week later, my husband and my brother came, and he said, 'What's done is from Allah. Whatever happens now, Allah will make it better. Don't cry, just have patience.'"

She shared more about her experience in prison as,
"I was shocked, just observing everything around me. I had no idea how different and strange the environment would be."

"When you enter jail, they don't tell you how long you'll stay. They just say, 'You'll be out soon, because they're scared you might try to run away or escape."
As for legal matters, even the words mulzim (accused) or mujrim (criminal), I didn't know what they meant. I had no awareness of legal issues."

When a person commits a crime and gets imprisoned, it's his/her legal right to get information about what is going to happen and what they have to deal with. What time he/she will be spending in prison and what our constitution and law says about it. Her claim that *"When you enter jail, they don't tell you how long you'll stay. They just say, 'You'll be out soon, because they're scared you might try to run away or escape"* is disturbing because a person suffers more in anticipation of the unknown as compared to reality. It is another form of punishing someone psychologically, which should be avoided in professional institutions. These are basic human rights, and when we have signed the treaty to make our prisons rehabilitative rather than punitive, then it is the responsibility of the prison system to deal with prisoners with basic respect and fulfill their rights to get information about their cases (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Nargis shared that she was also unaware of the legal issues and prison environment, even her lawyers didn't explain what was happening, they just told her what she had to say and where she needed to be quiet. This behavior stems from patriarchy, where women are considered less intelligent and are kept uninformed about their basic rights and basic information. Upon my question, did she have any idea about legal matters? She replied,

"I didn't know anything. Everything just happened automatically. Over there, everything runs on lies. Once, I told my lawyer that the other party was lying, but he signaled me to stay quiet. They used to say, 'Everything here runs on lies."

Her lawyer, saying everything works on lies in our system, shows how truth is sidelined, and manipulation and control win in our criminal justice system. It also shows her helplessness and lack of advocacy for a woman in our system, where lawyers are meant to represent a person to protect their rights, but are treating them as someone who lacks agency and knowledge, and refrain from explaining the situation and preparing them for the court hearings. This reinforces the claims given by feminist criminology that women in prison suffer more in terms of loss of agency, basic human rights, and fair treatment (Barlow,

2014). Our criminal justice system needs reforms to make it more reliable, authentic, and inclusive for every actor, especially for women.

4.5.4 Subtheme: Rumors and Misinformation Increase Stress

Lack of information about their legal rights and details about their cases results in hardships that undertrial inmates have to face, which is later multiplied by the negligence of the prison staff in keeping them updated. They get caught in legal limbo, without clear communication about the status of their trials, potential outcomes, or the charges they face. This delay in hearing, along with uncertainty and lack of information, increases their anxiety, which results in prolonged detention without being convicted of any crime. The lack of information or legal resources makes the situation even worse because many undertrial prisoners who lack financial backing or the means to afford legal help have to suffer in anticipation as they struggle to understand the process. Here comes the responsibility of prison staff who can inform them about their situation, but instead of helping them get access to information or legal help, they act indifferently or do not help at all. Kausar shared,

> *"But when I went to jail, I was very scared. Everyone used to say, "It's a death sentence" — they would use that phrase a lot. Everyone would say, "They'll lock you in solitary tomorrow," and "they'll do this and that." Even the police officers inside used to scare us a lot. Then they took this case to court, and when we were released, those who were there said that the sentence would either be death or 14 years (life imprisonment)—such a heavy sentence. But when everyone found out about our business and what was going on behind the scenes, our previous record was clean. So, after three years, they gave us a sentence and then cleared our names. My brother was released first, and I was released later, after 4 years and 6 months, while my brother spent 4 years and 3 months."*

Kausar's story explains her helplessness and suffering, not just physical but also psychological, daily, experiencing the fear of the unknown due to a lack of an organized and informed system to help those who have no idea what is going to happen. It represents pre-trial fear and institutional intimidation, adding to her struggles when she was new to that environment, and she claimed to have no clue about what she was charged with or why she got imprisoned. No one can imagine the fear of getting a death sentence for sitting in a car; her trauma represents the core concern of feminist criminology (Becker, 2018). To address these challenges, it is important to change our criminal justice system by improving access to legal representation through regular counselling and legal aid programs. By establishing a case tracking system,

we can reduce the delays and ensure justice is provided on time. There is a dire need to train prison staff in the inmates' legal rights, and independent bodies to oversee the staff actions should be maintained to keep everyone in check and to ensure the system is running smoothly. Peer mentorship programs and psychological support can help prisoners cope with stress. To ensure transparency and accountability, there is a need to regulate audits, independent committees, and public awareness campaigns.

This theme represents the grievances of female inmates with the criminal justice system, where they face bias, injustice, and unfair treatment at the hands of the system that was meant to protect them. They reported a lack of support, harassment, verbal and physical abuse, violence, and open plunder at the hands of police at the time of arrest. They complain about the lack of an inclusive reporting system that leaves them little to no option but to engage in criminal activity consciously or unconsciously. Moving forward, when they get imprisoned or arrest, they struggle to get legal aid, and when they get one, they lack agency as they are deliberately kept uninformed about court proceedings and legal matters, which increases their sufferings as they suffer from fear of unknown and the prison inmates and prison staff adds to their psychological sufferings by guessing their sentences wrong leaving them in anxiety and stress. Our criminal justice system needs correction from the step of reporting, to getting legal aid in prison, access to information and counselling, fair treatment, timely justice, and transparency and accountability of staff in prisons. Above all, our police need corrections; they need to understand their role as protectors, not looters or harassers. They need to understand that not every accused is a criminal and every criminal has basic human rights(Justice Project Pakistan, 2015; Justice Project Pakistan & OMCT, 2021).

4.6.1. Theme 6: Prison Described by Ex-convicts

An inmate's perception of prison is a representation of the criminal justice system and prison environment; it shows why the specific society and prison keep the inmates, either for rehabilitation or for punishment. Their perception is shaped by their personal experiences, emotional responses, and the conditions they face during incarceration. It reflects the physical and psychological impacts of the very environment, as well as the interactions they have with other inmates, prison staff, and their families. Every respondent described prison as a place where people are sent to be punished for their crime. Inmates' descriptions of prison as a place of punishment go beyond physical space; they reflect a lively reality of loss, shame, silence, and endurance. For many, the punishment is not limited to their crimes but extends to their bodies, minds, and families, revealing how prison becomes a symbol of societal rejection and personal suffering.

When I asked how they perceived prison? Nargis said,

"*My mother, may Allah grant her paradise, used to say that even if a cage is made of Gold, it remains a cage. There was a big grill in jail, and whenever I stood near it, I couldn't help but think of her words, that even if a cage is made of Gold, it is still a cage."*

She added,

"I say that some people come out of prison reformed, while others come out worse than before. You see, just like Allah has created two paths in life — one right and one wrong — the same two paths exist inside prison as well. Since there's no connection with the outside world, men and women inside the jail form connections with each other. They even exchange letters."

'Cage made of gold', the phrase represents helplessness, no matter what facilities are provided, a prison gives a lack of connection, confinement, and isolation. She faced difficulties that many women face; the perception of prison goes beyond just the physical conditions and touches upon psychological effects, such as feelings of fear, helplessness, and trauma. The isolation from family, the stigma of being a prisoner, and the lack of support systems can exacerbate these emotions.

The statement that "*You see, just like Allah has created two paths in life one right and one wrong the same two paths exist inside prison as well", shows* that prisoners can choose between a constructive path (leading to reform, spiritual and metal growth, reflection and learning) and a destructive path (leading to crime networks, survival, anger, and hopelessness). The recent justice system at the global level claims that prisons should work as rehabilitative centers where a person should be prepared to become a law-abiding citizen and should be able to grow well when they go outside prison to reduce their chances of recidivism (Siegel & Worrall, 2017). Pakistan has also signed treaties like the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1996, the Convention against Torture (UNCAT) in 2008, where we claim to treat our prisoners with basic human rights, and the Mandela Rules, which make us bound to make our prisons rehabilitative, to avoid further recidivism and reduce the rate of crime. But the respondents' claim shows that institutions act neutrally, providing both paths, which means it's weak and lacks support to make a person's life better. It totally depends on an inmate's background and will to reform; the prison system has little to do with it. As Rabail claimed, in prison, there is every kind of illegal activity going on, as it's done in society. For her, prison is a small unit of

society, where a person can choose to refrain or also can become a professional criminal. She also claimed that prison is a place of money-making for police officers. She spoke

"Prison police walon ka Dubai hai," which means *"Prison is Dubai for the police".*

When I inquired what she meant by Dubai, she said.
"Just like when you go to Dubai, it confirms you are going to make a lot of money out there. Just like that, prison acts like a place of money-making for police officers and prison staff, and I can tell you they give money to get posted there. Every kind of illegal activity is carried out in prison; name any activity, either drug intake, drug trafficking, adultery, alcohol consumption, etc. But it's not forceful; those who want to be on the right path can follow it, but they don't stop those who are on the wrong path; instead, they make money out of it. Every superintendent and the staff below them are involved. There are just a few good officers; everyone else there comes to make money."

Rabail's remarks on the prison system as a place for money-making for higher authorities is a powerful critique that exposes exploitation, deep-rooted corruption, and institutional failure of the police, prison system, and our criminal justice system. It shows a lack of meaningful checks and balances, corrupt or weak monitoring bodies, and that the inmates are powerless to report or are forced to keep quiet. Kausar's remarks on the prison system are somewhat covered, but she is also trying to share that the system is corrupt and considers it a place of punishment where a person must choose between right and wrong.

She said,

"They send us to prison as punishment so that we may improve ourselves and reform. I believe there should be reform, but it doesn't happen for everyone. The system is broken, and the prison staff are involved in making it worse. They know exactly what's going on inside, who is doing what, and they are all complicit. They support those behaviors; they're aware of it all. Many women don't change even after being released. They say, 'People don't let us live.' Society has branded us with the stain of sin. They look at us with strange, judgmental eyes. What are we supposed to do? We have no other work or opportunities available to us."

Her words that "*The system is broken, and the prison staff are involved in making it worse. They know exactly what's going on inside, who is doing what, and they are all complicit. They support those*

behaviors; they're aware of it all. Many women don't change even after being released", are telling the same story of system breakdown, corruption, and immoral activities being conducted in prison. Her claim that the prison staff knows everything, "who is doing what", shows that she is still afraid of something, as she told in hidden words. When a system designed for correction or rehabilitation itself gets involved in the activities they are imprisoning or rehabilitating, it loses credibility, and the institution fails to deliver what it was meant to. Other respondents also called prison a place of punishment.

Zahida said,

> "*Obviously, a crime must have been committed; that's why one is taken to prison as punishment. I was a woman who lived at home with my children; I did not know such matters."*

Natasha said,

> *"They put people in jail for punishment of the crime they committed".*

Taken together, these narratives demonstrate that prisons in Pakistan are overwhelmingly perceived by inmates as institutions of punishment rather than rehabilitation. The recurring themes of corruption, exploitation by prison staff, and the persistence of illegal activities within prison walls reveal a system that functions less as a corrective institution and more as a site of social abandonment and economic extraction. While international frameworks such as the Mandela Rules, CEDAW, and UNCAT commit Pakistan to safeguarding prisoners' rights and fostering rehabilitation, the accounts of these women highlight a stark disconnect between policy and practice. The absence of effective oversight, accountability, and trained personnel perpetuates a culture where prisoners are left to navigate between "right and wrong" on their own, with little structural support for reform. Instead of preparing inmates to reintegrate as law-abiding citizens, the prison system reinforces cycles of stigma, marginalization, and recidivism. These findings underscore the urgent need for transparent monitoring mechanisms, professionalized prison staff, and genuine rehabilitative programming that can transform prisons from spaces of punishment and corruption into institutions capable of facilitating dignity, growth, and reintegration.

4.6.2. Subtheme: Lack of Basic Facilities and Survival in Prison

CEDAW and Mandala Rules emphasized basic human rights of prisoners, and the prison should provide every basic need that a human requires to live, like basic hygiene, access to healthy food, healthcare facilities, sunlight, and enough space to breathe (Human Rights Watch, 2020). When asked about the time they spent in prison. Rabail said

> *Life in jail is very tough. The cells are small rooms with a small washroom in a corner. In the barracks, there were three washrooms. It is a hard place to live."*

Fakhra also shared,

> *"Jail is like a golden cage. As soon as you enter, there's a large hall. There were beds—triple bunk beds with ceilings close above them, three beds stacked together, and stairs on the side. There's a lawn for walking around, and it's fairly large."*

Nargis said,

> *"Because I feel that those who live there (in prison) are given something in the food or drink that dulls the memory of the outside world. One remains absorbed only in those things, looking after vegetables and fruits, preserving them. And look, how intense the heat used to be, and even in that heat, we could wrap the vegetables in cloth and preserve them for up to a month without letting them spoil. If we were given vegetables one day, we'd manage them for at least 15 days: tomatoes, coriander, and green chilies. We used to take lawn dupattas, line baskets with them, put the vegetables inside, keep them moist, and pour water on them regularly. It felt like the vegetables came straight out of a fridge. A fan used to run above, and there was no fridge there. If it was too hot in the room, we would wet our beds with the cotton webbing on them and lie down. It felt like we were sleeping with the AC on." (She starts laughing, feeling proud of this achievement.) Each room only had one fan."*

Nargis explained their survival in prison, when they lacked basic facilities like refrigerators to keep their food fresh, and a proper ventilation system to deal with extreme heat. Our prison system lacks basic facilities, either on purpose or lack of budget. If it is on purpose to keep the women busy in doing basics like finding ways to keep their vegetables fresh due to a lack of a fridge or finding ways to cool their bodies in summer due to a lack of a sufficient ventilation system. If it's intentional, it's purposeless, because these daily struggles can't help them think of starting a better life after prison or repenting from the path of crimes and wrongdoings.

Moreover, the lack of privacy, overcrowded conditions, and a rigid, often harsh routine can contribute to feelings of dehumanization. Women may find it difficult to adapt to the punitive aspects of prison life, especially if the system was not designed with their needs in mind. The lack of suitable healthcare, inadequate living conditions, and limited opportunities for self-improvement or rehabilitation only reinforce these feelings. Rabail shared,

> *"Prisons must provide basic facilities and should work on rehabilitative measures to keep the inmates on the right path."*

The narratives reflect that the absence of basic facilities in prisons not only undermines the dignity of inmates but also contradicts international human rights frameworks such as the CEDAW and the Mandela Rules, both of which obligate states to ensure that prisoners have access to adequate food, healthcare, hygiene, ventilation, and humane living conditions. Accounts from respondents, such as surviving extreme heat by wetting their bedding or preserving vegetables without refrigeration, highlight how women prisoners are compelled to improvise daily for basic survival. These strategies, while demonstrating resilience, reveal systemic neglect that places the burden of survival on inmates rather than the institution. The lack of proper facilities, therefore, transforms prison into a site of constant struggle, where energy is spent coping with deprivation instead of pursuing reform, reflection, or skill-building.

Furthermore, the overcrowding, lack of privacy, and inadequate healthcare reported by respondents contribute to what scholars describe as the dehumanizing effects of incarceration. For women in particular, these conditions exacerbate vulnerabilities, reinforcing a sense of punishment that extends beyond lawful deprivation of liberty. Rather than preparing individuals for reintegration, the system enforces daily hardships that diminish psychological well-being and erode human dignity. As Rabail emphasized, the provision of basic facilities and rehabilitative measures is central not only to humane treatment but also to preventing recidivism. Without these, prisons fail to function as spaces of correction and instead perpetuate cycles of marginalization, neglect, and survivalism.

4.6.3. Subtheme: Quality of Food Inside Prison

When asked about the quality of food in prison, respondents reported it to be fine, as they expected the food in prison to be, but when asked to compare it with the food at home, they pointed out some issues,

which meant they had internalized that they would not be getting proper food out of punishment. The quality of food was reported to be fine, but with some hygiene issues. Nargis said,

> *"The food used to be okay. Everyone got two pieces of meat and thin, watery gravy. The bread/chapati would get cold, so we would heat them ourselves. We got rations from the canteen, and sometimes NGOs would come and donate things."*

Fakhra, however, had some issues; she got TB in prison. Usually, TB patients in prison are treated with more nutritious food. She said she was not given that food most often because she couldn't give money to the prison staff; on the other hand, a prisoner who was a foreigner was given that special food daily. Plus, the regular food she got had insects whenever there was a vegetable item on the menu, so that day, she would just eat bread. She said,

> *"They used to make gravy of everything, like lady fingers and eggplants. You have to eat food even though it has worms in it. You have to eat it, even if you have to add mud to it; you will eat it when you feel hungry. I couldn't eat eggplants as they provoked vomiting for me, so I used to eat just bread that day. My children were in Edhi home, they couldn't send me money that I could give to prison staff, so in return, prison staff didn't give me special food for the patients of TB when I got TB."*

Maintaining the quality of food in prisons presents challenges, particularly when it must be prepared in large quantities daily. Nonetheless, it remains the responsibility of prison authorities to ensure that the nutritional and hygienic standards of meals meet basic human rights obligations. Where staff are unable to uphold these standards, involving prisoners themselves in food preparation under proper supervision may not only enhance quality, as inmates are more likely to exercise caution when cooking food that they themselves will consume, but also reduce institutional labor costs. Traditionally, this responsibility is assigned to male inmates, yet expanding such roles across the prison population could create a more equitable and sustainable system.

Furthermore, narratives reveal that food distribution and quality within women's prisons are shaped by inequality and favoritism. Women from privileged family backgrounds or those able to pay bribes to prison staff often receive preferential treatment, including better food and living conditions, while poorer inmates endure substandard provisions. Such disparities reflect broader patterns of structural inequality that permeate carceral institutions, undermining the principle of equal treatment. Addressing these

practices requires not only improvements in food quality but also stricter oversight mechanisms to ensure fairness, transparency, and the upholding of prisoners' basic rights.

4.6.4. Sub-theme: Privacy in Prison

Every person needs some space, time to sit and think about themselves, and a place where they can be themselves to regulate their emotion. In prison, women are constantly under surveillance, and they have to share everything, like their space, their room, and their belongings. This lack of privacy affects their emotions and sense of self; these factors are required for rehabilitation (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004). When asked about privacy, the respondents were so used to not having it that they measured privacy with personal lockers. Kausar said,

> *"We each had our own locker, so there was privacy."*

Rabail said,

> *"There must be some privacy; if they can't give us separate rooms, at least they should separate us from the women who create trouble."*

Fakhra said,

> *"There should be a slightly different system; there should be a bit of privacy, one cannot be everyone every time, there must be some space where we can at least sit alone."*

Internationally, every inmate is placed in a separate cell, keeping in mind the need for personal space, space to reconnect with the self, and time to think about one's life and circumstances (Prison Reform Trust, 2013). This lack of privacy not just increases inmates' anxiety and frustration but also results in quarrels between the inmates, a lack of trust, a place for gossip and often spreading misinformation, and makes it difficult for the prison staff to deal with the gangs in prison.

4.6.5 Sub-theme: Gang System in Prison

Upon asking the question of gang systems in prison, how they operate, and on what basis they are formed. The inmates replied with same answer, as it usually lacks gang system but there is a group of Pashtoon women, that live together and disobey some laws of prison, like keeping mobile phones with them, using foul language and they claim to not change, and these are the women that often recidivate and get

imprisoned quite a few time, which put out the fear of getting imprisoned and they are backed by proper gangs that are involved in drug trafficking.

Kausar shared as,

> *"There was a women's gang inside the prison too. I never went near them. Most of them were from Peshawar. They managed to keep phones and always knew who was where. They had people behind their supporters who used to visit them and help them. They openly said to everyone's face that once they get out, they will go back to doing the same things."*

The informal existence of gangs within prisons illustrates how power, influence, and criminal networks continue to operate within carceral spaces, often overlooked by the criminal justice system. The presence of such groups calls into question both the efficiency and the efficacy of institutional mechanisms designed to maintain order and support rehabilitation. Women, in particular, are rendered vulnerable to these networks due to multiple intersecting factors, including social rejection, stigmatization associated with the label of 'prisoner' or 'criminal,' inadequate rehabilitative measures, and insufficient state or societal support. In this context, many incarcerated women seek solidarity, protection, and a sense of belonging within such groups, even though these affiliations often exploit them, providing financial incentives in exchange for compliance. Addressing these dynamics necessitates targeted interventions that focus on the specific needs of women in prison, emphasizing rehabilitation and reintegration strategies that reduce reliance on such informal structures and foster pathways toward social reintegration.

4.6.6. Subtheme: Unknown Calls from gangs and people

As mentioned above, when women are vulnerable and lack support, they sometimes join gangs involved in criminal activities. It was not in my research question, but the respondents revealed in their stories that they get offers from the gangs through phone calls or other inmates in prison, and when they leave prison.

As Kausar said,

> *"When I came out of prison, I received a phone call from an unknown number. When I received the call, they used my full name and told me that they knew I was imprisoned for 9C. They asked me to work*

with them for money, and in return, they would always support me. I refused their offer as I had promised my God to be on the right path."

Rabail told a similar story. She said,

"I received a phone call after release, where a person took my name and asked me to assist him in kidnapping a girl, he said that 'I know you were in prison and no-one will believe you now, so it's better to work with me, you will get money and support in return', I asked him to mind his own business and never call me again otherwise I will report him. It was I who had done nothing, and my conscience was satisfied. Now, imagine a woman who has been guilty and needs money; she must have accepted the offer for money, and I know people do that. People can do anything for money".

This is not just the case with Kausar or Rabail; every respondent said that they get offers from the women they knew from prison in 9C or 9D, who recidivated. They are told that they can earn extra money, but Fakhra said,

"I refused just for one reason, my children, I have their whole life in front of me, I can't risk their life for a mistake."

Nargis said that she was also contacted by someone, as he thought the woman in prison, being vulnerable, would be friends with him. It is a usual mentality in patriarchal societies where men, when they see a woman alone, rather than helping her, offer friendship and want to have an affair. Nargis said,

"While I was in jail, someone contacted me back then, there were no mobile phones, and that man was trying to befriend me. Obviously, Allah has placed this instinct in women; we can sense things. I told him, 'Brother, are you in your senses?' He said, 'Just be friendly with me like this, and I'll support you. I'll do this, I'll do that. Just keep talking to me on the phone.' I told him, 'I thought you called me out of sympathy, maybe to find a solution with my children, maybe to help with some reconciliation." But brother, how foolish would I be to get involved in something like this with you? If I had wanted such a relationship, I would've stayed with the same man and not ended up in jail like this, disgraced—me and my children. Where am I, and where are my children? What would I gain from being friends with you?'"

For many women attempting to reintegrate into society following incarceration, the absence of economic resources, stable housing, supportive relationships, or community networks constitutes a profound barrier

to successful reentry. In rare instances where limited support is available, some women manage reintegration independently. However, in cases where familial or social ties are severed and no access to secure housing is provided, many are left highly vulnerable. This vulnerability is frequently exploited either through their own reliance on contacts established during imprisonment or by criminal gangs that deliberately monitor, and recruit recently released women perceived as socially and economically precarious. Such circumstances significantly heighten the risk of recidivism.

These dynamic underscores the structural failures of carceral systems that prioritize containment over rehabilitation. When prison environments do not provide pathways for psychological support, skill development, or meaningful reintegration, incarceration becomes counterproductive, merely reproducing cycles of marginalization and reoffending. To disrupt the nexus between vulnerability and gang exploitation, State institutions must reorient correctional models toward comprehensive rehabilitation, including mental health care, vocational training, and sustained post-release support. Only through such measures can the systemic drivers of recidivism be mitigated and the coercive influence of criminal networks over ex-convicts reduced.

4.6.7. Subtheme: Lack of Women-Specific Facilities in Prison

Prisons have historically been designed with male inmates in mind, often overlooking the distinct needs of women (Achakzai, 2012; Alam, 2022). As a result, many prison systems fail to provide adequate facilities that cater to women's physical, emotional, and reproductive health. Women in prison require gender-sensitive accommodations, including access to menstrual hygiene products, maternal care, mental health services, and private spaces for personal care. When asked the question of whether they think prisons are designed keeping in view the needs of women, Kausar replied,

> *"The prison was not built keeping women's needs in mind. There's strictness there; a woman cannot live in such conditions—it becomes very difficult. At home, women are free, but in prison, one has to live with whatever is given; however, it's given due to helplessness. When I arrived, there were coarse mats made of jute that pricked the body; those were our beds. It was only a year to a year and a half later that proper beds were introduced. Foam mattresses were provided. We spent that initial year and a half in extreme hardship."*

The understanding of women's specific needs is not that clear because they didn't get them. Nargis explained basic human needs as women's specific needs, she said,

> *"Yes, absolutely. They used to take care of us well. The system was good. They did try to meet our needs. Obviously, they don't give from their own pockets, but they did give us the freedom to write down what we needed from the canteen. There was a canteen system in place. Every evening, groceries and vegetables would arrive, and whatever items women typically need were also available. We would write down (they used to write as proof that they got it, and the money was paid from their prison account) what we needed, and it was provided."*

Feminist Criminology critiques that women are not treated according to their needs, and Kausar's words that "There's strictness there; a woman cannot live in such conditions—it becomes very difficult" clearly indicate the lack of women-specific facilities in prison. There is a need to treat women differently, as is practiced worldwide. First of all, women should never be arrested before it's confirmed that they have committed that crime, as it ruins a woman's life, which was mentioned earlier by Rabail that *"a woman should never be put in prison immediately".* At the second stage, if a woman has committed a crime, her circumstances should be considered, as recommended by feminist criminology (Barlow, 2014). And if she had children or any other responsibility, she should be given alternate punishments like a fine, house arrest, or community service. Even if it's mandatory to imprison, then she should be dealt with accordingly, first given counselling, then treated according to her case, and given enough space and time to reconnect and repent, and then she should be taught skills that can help her support herself and save her from gangs.

4.6.8. Sub-theme: Concerns of Women with Children

The presence of children, including newborns, inside women's prisons raises critical concerns about child rights and developmental needs. Incarcerated mothers often have no choice but to keep their children with them, especially if they have no guardians outside. In many cases, these children spend formative years within the prison environment, where basic facilities are either absent or dependent on external NGOs. While some NGOs step in to provide food, fruits, clothing, medicine, and informal education, the responsibility for these children's well-being, education, and future cannot rest solely on non-state actors. Upon asking about the condition of children in prison. Kausar said,

"There were very small children inside, even newborns. I witnessed many births during my time there. For small children—things like food, milk, biscuits, or fruit—it was the NGOs who came and provided these. Inside the prison, the children were only given milk and medicine. Fruit was given occasionally, but these organizations, like Khubaib Foundation and WAT, were more active in fulfilling these needs. Inside the prison, there was one classroom, a sewing center, and a computer center. I've heard that now the system has improved quite a bit. But the government should focus on the children's food, upbringing, and education. Because their future is ruined, right? Adults come and go from prison, but what's the fault of those innocent children? Two years, four years, eight years, ten years of their lives get wasted inside. These organizations build schools, yes, but the government should also take responsibility."

Fakhra said,

"Children should never be kept in prison; they learn false language there, their fear of prison goes away, and later they can get involved in such activities."

"When I was in prison, I was always worried for my children, as no one supported them, neither my family nor my husband's, and I was always praying that I would not get any bad news about my children."

Fakhra said there is no point in keeping women in prison when they have children. Her children's life gets ruined. She shared

"Whenever they visited me, I told them every time, if anyone touches you by any chance, you must tell your eldest brother or me, or any woman around you, don't tell any man. Edhi sir, May Allah grant him peace in heaven, and he was alive at that time. He took special care of my children. My children call him their father to this day. He used to take my children from Lahore to Adiala just to make them meet their parents every 15 days. My God saved my children, although my heart was always worried for them; I couldn't sleep at night thinking about them."

Natasha said,

"I had two sons, and my husband was watching them behind me. My husband used to lock them at home whenever he went outside for work or to get anything, and all that time I used to think, God forbid if

something would happen to them? While crying, she said, "For four years I survived in prison, I couldn't sleep well out of my concern for my children."

Fakhra's suggestion best represents the concerns of women with children in prison. A woman with children should never be imprisoned and should go through the different procedures of correction mentioned above. If it's necessary to imprison a woman with children, then the government must establish a clear and humane policy for the care, nutrition, and education of children residing with their mothers in prison. Long-term imprisonment affects not only the incarcerated women but also the next generation, who grow up in confined spaces, away from normal childhood experiences and developmental opportunities.

4.6.9. Subtheme: Lack of Hygiene and Common Diseases

Poor sanitary conditions in women's prisons, where basic hygiene becomes a challenge due to infrastructural neglect and resource limitations. Scabies, a contagious skin infection often spread through shared bedding and poor hygiene, is a common issue in overcrowded or unsanitary correctional facilities. The inmate's comment reflects how inadequate sunlight exposure to bedding and insufficient bathing water contributed to the spread of disease. Zahida, Kausar, Rabail, and Zubaida said that there was a lack of facilities for hygiene, which causes some common diseases. Like Kausar said,

"When I was there, scabies was a widespread problem. You see, the bedding didn't get any sunlight. I used to put my clothes out in the sun every other day, but not everyone did that, which caused the scabies to spread. There was also a shortage of water for bathing; whoever managed to bathe first did, and the rest had to go without.

Jasmine talked about hepatitis and TB being common in prison. She said,

"*There were cases of hepatitis and TB there. I saw two women who had it—they were kept in separate rooms."*

Zubaida, who experienced TB, said,

"I was not given a separate room, but some days they would offer me the special food, it was on the mood of prison staff, as I couldn't give them money, so they didn't treat me well, I had duties of cleaning the floor which I was given rest for just 2 week and I had to do that work despite I was not well."

Lack of hygiene and spread of diseases are highly connected, and this lack of hygiene in prisons stems from a lack of concern from prison staff, inadequate water, limited space, and overcrowded wards in prison. This lack of hygiene results in the spread of TB, hepatitis, and certain skin diseases, as reported by the ex-convicts. This is a clear violation of Article 12 CEDAW and the Mandela Rules, a demonstration of a systematic failure to protect prisoners' health. Our criminal justice system needs to focus more on the basic rights of prisoners in order to keep them safe and to protect their physical and mental health, so that they can prepare them to build a better life after leaving prison (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

4.6.10. Subtheme: Discrimination Based on the Type of Crime in Prison

I interviewed 7 respondents, and 4 out of them were involved in 302 cases charged with murder, and 2 out of them were sentenced for 9C, keeping, and selling narcotics. When I interviewed them and asked the question about in what cases women are usually incarcerated in prison. They mentioned murder, cases of drug abuse, theft, robbery, fraud, kidnapping, and adultery. They said that they were asked to sit in groups as per their crime, whenever an official visited, and they were called by their cases rather than being called by their names. As Kausar mentioned,

"*They used to call us hawalati (under trial). I didn't know what that meant either. Later, a woman next to me told me that hawalati is someone whose case is still ongoing, and qaidi (sentenced) is someone who has been convicted. One day, someone called me hawalati, and that woman explained it to me, saying, 'You haven't been sentenced yet, so they call you hawalati.'"*

She added,

"There are women in 302, 9C, adultery, kidnapping, robbery or theft, and in fraud cases. The prison staff treat everyone the same; everyone is given the same food, the same treatment, and the same duties. But those who come in adultery cases are hated the most, although they come for a week, but even inmates don't like to sit with them or talk to them, then come those involved in kidnapping and theft, then 302, and in the end 9c."

Not just that, they became so used to the norm of calling people by their cases or legal position in prison that they themselves used the terms in answering my questions. Fakhra said,

"They consider 302 the worst crime, then comes the theft and Kidnapping for Ransome, but all of them showed hatred for those involved in adultery, although they were incarcerated for a week or two and

later got bail, hate maybe is not the appropriate word for that they are taunted, ostracized and shamed openly by the prison staff and other inmates, and similar things happens with someone new in prison either she is 302, 9c, and I would say for everyone. But people in cases of narcotics get less ostracized, and those involved in adultery get most called out and shamed in front of everyone".

Rabail also confirmed that by telling,

"In prison, those who are incarcerated in hudood cases or adultery cases are hated the most; mostly, other women don't talk to them, they refrain from sitting with them, they really do hate them there. The staff ostracizes them openly and makes them feel shame by making sentences about their personal lives. Then comes the one involved in kidnapping, theft and robbery, then murder, and then 9C, they just hate them, else they are given normal food, and they live in normal conditions as we do."

Similar responses were given by Natasha, Zahida, and Nargis. They confirmed that there isn't any discrimination based on the crimes they commit; they get equal treatment, they are just called out and hated by others if they are involved in adultery. On the scale of hatred experienced in the basis of crime in prison, adultery is at the top, and murder and 9C cases are at the lowest point. Which shows a pattern, as 9C cases are the most common in prison and then comes the murder cases, so it becomes a norm for them to deal with them and they get used to accepting them, adultery cases or hudood cases are the least and they are hated by the religion and society as well so is the case in prison and they get bailed out easily which also becomes a point of hating as they get to leave the place easily as compared to other inmates. This is normal in prison, but it should be avoided, as it's not the duty of prison staff or inmates to call out the moral police; they are there to help, organize, and build their character. Calling out is never a solution, and measures should be taken in the reforms to deal with such issues in the criminal justice system.

4.6.11. Sub-theme: Financial Exploitation of Inmates at the Hands of Prison Staff and Corrections Required:

Kausar said,

"They used to misbehave too, they'd come and call you over harshly, what can I say, everyone has their own temperament. If someone said something to me, I would just say that Allah is watching everything. Among the matron staff, one was nice; she was Christian. The other one, a Punjabi, used to be very

strict. She would make us do personal tasks like getting her hair dyed, giving her massages, pressing her shoulders, facials, and things like that."

Nargis said,

"The prison staff behave well only with those who are good to them, give them money for every work or do their personal chores; if someone is bad, they treat them badly. To them, a 'good' inmate is the one who obeys them and doesn't speak up about the dishonesty and wrongdoing they're involved in."

Inmates reported exploitation from prison staff, Fakhra said,

"*They used to take money even for allowing meetings (with family). If I received 1000 rupees for something, they would take 200 from everyone who had their own share. This was in 2006. If something came from home, like food or drink, they would say, 'Give us a portion of this too.' The staff needs to be dealt with strictly. Among the staff, there are both kinds of people; some are good. But everyone is nice to the one who feeds them and gives them things."*

This behavior hasn't changed, as is also confirmed by Natasha, who just came out of prison 3 months ago. She said,

"They take money for everything, if you want to meet your family, or you have to receive something your family sent, or you need something illegal from prison. If you have money, your life in prison gets a bit easier; if you don't have it, you will have to work for them, like giving massages, peeling their vegetables, or dyeing their hair. One needs to have good relations with the staff; otherwise, life becomes more difficult."

These reports of a lack of professionalism, mistreatment, and exploitation at the hands of prison staff showing favoritism, corruption, and abuse of power are highly concerning because instead of performing their duties and helping the inmates in building their character and skill set, they are involved in exploiting the most vulnerable strata of our society. This lack of concern and dishonesty with their duties while ignoring the wrong activities in prison creates an environment where the prisoners are on their own.

When inmates are left to choose between the right and wrong path on their own in prison, it reflects a lack of proper guidance, inadequate rehabilitation, and ineffective supervision. This absence of support forces

inmates to navigate the harsh realities of prison life without adequate resources, leading to a higher likelihood of criminal behavior and reoffending. It also exposes the prison system's failure to provide rehabilitative services or positive role models. Ultimately, this situation highlights the prison's inadequacy in fostering personal growth and transformation, as a well-structured system that should guide inmates toward better decision-making and reintegration into society. Kausar shared,

> *"There are two types of people in there as well — some on the right path and some on the wrong. Some would say, "Yes, when we get out, we'll continue doing things like this," but I stayed away from them because I knew it was wrong — I had already suffered one major downfall. Even inside, people hold hatred; even there, two groups form — one of the good and one of the bad."*

It shows that the focus should be on creating a prison environment that prioritizes rehabilitation over mere punishment. Inmates should have access to proper guidance through education, vocational training, and psychological support to help them make better choices. Prison staff need to be trained to empathize with inmates and resolve conflicts effectively, rather than merely enforcing rules. Additionally, mentorship programs and clear, consistent enforcement of rules can help steer inmates towards the right path. Ensuring access to legal resources, especially for undertrial prisoners, can prevent feelings of neglect and help them feel supported in their journey toward reform.

There is no mechanism to complain if the staff misbehaves; the inmates have to deal with them through giving money or doing their chores, like dying their hair or giving them a massage. Kausar said,

> *"Inside the jail, there were laws for food, drink, and the medical system, but you couldn't file complaints. You had to keep everyone happy—otherwise, stay quiet. There should be a proper system, and the higher authorities should also inquire. There should be a complaint box where someone can write and drop their grievance without mentioning their name."*

Prison authorities need to focus on transparency and a reporting mechanism in prisons. Female prisoners often perceive the prison system as a place of punishment rather than reform, largely due to the harsh environment, lack of empathy, and poor treatment by prison staff. Many reported experiencing disrespect, neglect, and even abuse, which deepens their trauma and sense of isolation. The absence of proper counseling, educational opportunities, and vocational training further limits their personal growth and preparation for life after release. Additionally, a lack of clear information about legal rights, support

systems, and reintegration programs leaves women feeling helpless and unprepared. This punitive environment not only fails to rehabilitate but also increases the risk of recidivism. To truly reshape lives, prisons must shift focus from punishment to rehabilitation, offering emotional support, skill-building opportunities, and respectful treatment to empower women for a successful return to society.

4.7.1. Theme 7: Types of Training Available in Prison

Prisons are correctional facilities that provide their inmates with activities that help them be busy and purposeful, aid in personal development, and make them ready to reintegrate into society with a new mindset and face challenges with courage. Internationally, in women's prisons, focus is kept on mental health and skill development to make them independent and empower them to live on their own. When I asked respondents about the types of training that were available to them in prison. Zahida shared,

> *"There were trainings on stitching, computer trainings, on embroidery, Artisan, embroidery, basic education, we used to enjoy a lot, most of these trainings were given by Women Aid Trust, government, and prison staff just managed and monitored everything, NGO was doing, what the government should have been doing."*

Prison labor, especially vocational activities like handicrafts or stitching, can empower incarcerated women economically and emotionally. Women shared that the work they did inside prison, whenever sold outside, particularly to foreigners, they received substantial earnings in return. This earning not only brought financial relief but also a sense of accomplishment and dignity. It also highlights how structured work opportunities in prison can provide both morale and material benefits to inmates. However, it's important to ensure such systems are transparent, fairly compensated, and genuinely rehabilitative. Kausar shared with happiness,

> *"Believe me, when we all worked together to make things, my husband used to sell them to foreigners. When we earned 30,000 each, we were all so happy. The food we ate there was from our hard work—we never got to eat such things outside. It was only because of our effort."*

Rabail also shared,

"I started working by borrowing money from my fellow inmates. The first thing I did was make a bag and do embroidery on it. It was sold in exchange for 1500 rupees. I felt so happy and empowered that I earned something."

Zahida said,

"I say that a woman comes out of prison braver. She develops courage and realizes that if she has endured such a difficult time, then she must live a proper life outside—never engage in anything wrong again."

Nargis said,

"Yes, thank God, Alhamdulillah, I can make my own decisions now—I feel free within myself."

Kausar said,

"Look at my hands, I work hard, I mind my own business, I don't blindly trust anyone. At night, I sleep peacefully, walking on the straight path. We both talk at night, happily, and sleep in peace. Through hard work, my confidence has increased."

Respondents were happy with the types of training available in prison; they confirmed that the training built their skillset and gave them confidence to earn and rebuild their lives. They appreciated the skills they got, and the help provided by the Women Aid Trust (WAT), they criticized the prison staff and gave all the credits to Women Aid Trust, but it cannot be overseen that allowing Women Aid Trust to work in prison and collaborating with them is an important step where our criminal justice system deserves a credit and appreciation to initiate such collaborations that work for the betterment of inmates.

4.7.2. Sub-theme: Quality of Certification Upon Completing the Training

One of the most basic and common purposes of these trainings is to build the capacity of inmates and to empower and make them independent when they reintegrate into society. The certificate they get is proof that they learned a skill that they can apply later to earn some money. But if the certification is a photocopy and mentions the name of prison or Women Aid Trust, it exposes their past and causes rejection from the job, and if someone gives them the job, they will never trust them, thus reducing employment opportunities

and stigmatizing them further, and affecting their confidence. So, the certificate never benefits them; instead, they never use it. Nargis said,

> *"The training certificate is of no use, plus the trends change, upon that lack of practice made me forget the techniques of make-up, the certificate they gave me, it was not original, it was a copy of the certificate, and there was the name of a prison on it, so I just tore it and never used it anywhere."*

Rabail said,

> *"What should I do with the certificate if it mentions prison on it. All my efforts to hide my previous life will go in vain if I use that certificate. It is still there in my case file, which I will burn someday so that my son should never know that I was once imprisoned."*

Fakhra said,

> *"They gave me a certificate, there was the name of the prison mentioned on it, I tore it, as it was useless for me. I also reported that to WAT as well, as I got training in stitching and parlor, but the certificate couldn't help me."*

All the inmates were satisfied with the training and skills they learnt in prison with the collaboration of Women's Aid Trust, but all of them showed disappointment with the certificates they received upon completion of those trainings, as it clearly mentioned that the person had received training in prison. Respondents reported that they never showed that certificate to anyone. The basic reason for providing a certificate is that it serves as proof that the person has the following skills, but if they cannot show that to anyone, then the purpose of giving a certificate goes in vain. There are many ways to improve this by collaborating with institutes that provide these skills and giving certificates from those companies, which will help inmates get jobs related to the skills they learned in prison.

4.8.1. Theme 8: Role of Women Aid Trust (WAT) in Prison and in Reintegration

Women Aid Trust has been working for the betterment of women in incarceration since 1997. Led by Miss Shaheena, this organization not only helps women in prison (Bagri, 2010), but it also supports ex-convicts financially, morally, legally, and in getting a shelter. Kausar said,

"When we were released from prison, WAT arranged a small rental house for us immediately, and they also gave me a job at their office. I worked with them for 11 years. When we got out of jail, we didn't return to our area; we cut ties with everything there. We didn't even want to go back."

She added,

"I didn't have many close friends. My family turned against me, and no one supported me—only WAT (Women Aid Trust) stood by me. The people at WAT helped me buy a 3-marla plot and even supported me in building a house on it. I saved some money through committee savings, and they also contributed. Asma Mushtaq, who was my lawyer, gave me Rs. 100,000. Neither the government nor any other organization provided help. My name was included in the Benazir Income Support Program, and I used to receive money, but after this incident, the villagers had my name removed, claiming that we were living a good life in Islamabad. They say we belong to landlords because my grandfather owned land. In 1970, my father sold that land, even before we were born. That record still shows our landholding status, which was never updated, so the aid we received was also stopped. Madam Shaheena sends me Rs. 5,000 every month and tells me not to tell anyone. She takes great care of me."

While non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working with ex-convicts and prison inmates play a crucial role in providing support, their capacity remains limited. A more sustainable approach would require collaboration between the State and such organizations in addressing the reintegration needs of incarcerated women. Effective partnerships of this kind could mitigate many of the structural barriers faced upon release, reduce the likelihood of reoffending, and protect women from exploitation by criminal networks.

Several respondents highlighted the significance of support provided by the Women Aid Trust (WAT), emphasizing how the presence of figures such as Miss Shaheena offered hope and direction. Through regular visits to prisons, she engaged with incarcerated women, encouraging them to envision productive futures beyond imprisonment. The involvement of psychologists in these interventions further contributed to women's rehabilitation by providing spaces for dialogue, emotional support, and strategies to cope with trauma. These accounts suggest that individualized attention and psychosocial care, combined with

institutional support, are central to fostering rehabilitation and reducing women's vulnerability to re-engagement with criminal activity. Kausar said,

"After I went to jail, may God bless Madam Shaheena—she had a small WAT organization with a little nursery. When I got out, I saw a small classroom. Earlier, I used to cry a lot inside; I used to just cry and never leave the barracks. But when I saw that there were children and a classroom, I ran inside. I saw a teacher named Fazeela and greeted her. There was a Superintendent, she told the matron, 'This woman who has come reads the Quran well and also teaches lessons, so keep her with you."

Zahida shared,

"I felt so helpless in prison, I used to cry all day, I thought of ending my life once. But one day, when Madam Shaheena and her team visited the prison, they asked me what I used to do before I got imprisoned, and I told them that I used to stitch clothes. They appreciated me and asked me to join their training on stitching and embroidery. I joined them, and they liked my words. Later, they made me the instructor. I used to teach other inmates. I got busy in prison, and I made money, which gave me courage. I will always be thankful to WAT; they helped me when I was hopeless, I started earning, and I supported my children. They later helped me in giving fine money that was due to me, and when I told them that I have 5 Marla land, they encouraged me to build my own house; they supported me in it by contributing a big chunk of money."

Rabail shared,

"When my husband, my in-laws, and even my own sisters outside prison left me, it was Madam Shaheena who came for help. My mother and my younger sister were incarcerated with me, and my younger sister had a stomach issue; she couldn't eat the food given in prison, so she had a special diet. When I shared the issue with Madam Shaheena, she sent special groceries to me in prison. She still sends money to my sister and mother, and whenever we got in trouble after coming back, we always asked her for help, and she never refused. May Allah be with her and always bless her."

Fakhra said,

"The moment we step out of prison, they (the prison people) forget us; there isn't any probation, nor do they check where we live, nor do they tell us anything that can help us in reintegration."

Natasha Shared,

> *"Madam Shaheena and her team encouraged me in prison to learn skills; they told me that it would help me later. I already knew stitching; they taught me embroidery, purse making, and parlor skills. Now I am confident that I can earn on my own. They helped me get legal aid, and because of their efforts, I am out today; they paid the fine that my husband couldn't pay. I will always pray for them".*

Nargis shared,

> *"When the other party agreed to forgive me in exchange for money, my husband had just 5 lakh rupees, and we had to give them 10 lakh rupees. Madam Shaheena and WAT helped us to pay the remaining 5 lac, they are doing a great work, they help women in prison and even support them after they come out."*

They paid the fine of 5 hundred thousand rupees to Nargis. They help Rabail on a regular basis, they help Zahida in building her own house, they provide legal aid to Natasha to get her legal documents, and they also help her financially after her release. They do whatever they can in their capacity to help ex-convicts re-integrate and to help them avoid recidivism. The prison department can collaborate with other such NGO working for the cause to bring more recreational activities and to provide a rehabilitative environment to the inmates. Women Aid Trust should get recognition from the government for its work, and it should be supported to expand its work at the national level.

4.9. Theme 9: Suggestion for the Government

When I asked the question, what do they want to suggest to our government? The respondents reflected on their journey through the prison, where they experienced the harsh realities of jail but also gained a deeper understanding of how systems of power work and how they can be exploited. They mention the corrupt practices they observed in prison, where some officers and inmates collaborated to manipulate the system. They stressed the need for the government to intervene and ensure that prison staff guide prisoners toward the right path instead of exploiting them. The idea is to provide released inmates with tools to reintegrate.

The speakers appreciated the help they received from the WAT program and emphasized the importance of government efforts to reduce recidivism and support ex-prisoners. They also expressed a desire to help others in need, particularly those who are forgotten or abandoned, like many inmates after their release.

Fakhra suggests the government should support female prisoners after their release, giving them loans or grants to help them start a new life. This support would allow them to earn a living and gradually repay the government. Rabail and Nargis express a deep desire to help others once she can stabilize her own life. She wants to create a safe space for those who are elderly or abandoned. Additionally, her thoughts reflect a compassionate approach toward those currently in jail, showing her ongoing concern for others still incarcerated. Fakhra said,

"Women in prison should be given confidence; they should be told that they are the same as they were before."

She added,

"The government should do something for a woman leaving prison, should get some security and support, either give them money for 2 years, in that time, I am sure she can do something for herself and can be independent. It's hard for women to survive alone on their own."

Nargis said,

"The government should also provide support to women when they are released from jail, giving them money or a loan, so they can work and, after some time, return the money. When a woman comes out of prison, she needs shelter in the first place. The government should assign some stipend for them for some time, until they get proper shelter and a job."

Kausar said,

"Prison is like a place of learning. The staff there should be correct. One, they shouldn't give any wrong training, but they do. They show the wrong path, but it's important not to follow it. The government should hold these officers accountable, especially those who guide people to the wrong path when they are forced into jail. The government should establish institutions that can provide jobs or teach skills to these individuals. They should monitor and focus on how they are doing. Not all fingers are equal. Those who want to improve, the government should train them and help them lead a good life outside. They should provide jobs or vocational training so they can live a respectable life. For instance, WAT people promised me a job, and I said I would do anything, even washing dishes, but I would earn my livelihood through halal means. And I did those jobs with all my heart. The kind of support WAT gave me is something the government should do. They should set up organizations that can teach skills to those coming out of jail, helping them stand on their own feet."

Zahida said,

> *"It was my right to get a permanent job as I have been working for years in government institutions like Dar-ul-Aman and Stitching centers, but I am still working as a representative from WAT. They give my examples, appreciated my work, but never helped me, me or my children should have got something in return. Government if wants prison inmates to be on the right path, they should understand it becomes difficult for them to follow that path after incarceration due to stigma and lack of opportunities, it's the government's responsibility to support women in prison, and even after that, if a small organization like WAT can do it, then the government can do better than them."*

Rabail said,

> *"When a woman working for gangs can save in lacs annually, they are why she will choose to be on the right path if she is not getting any support from the government and her family is rejecting her for getting imprisoned. Where would she get the motivation to repent? Tell me? It's a wake-up call for the government; they need to be lenient with women, give them jobs. I would suggest that those who leave prison should be given jobs in prison, as no one knows the system better than them; they know the pain of women living there. Every woman leaving prison desires to get back her dignity and respect in society. If she earns well, she will never go back to that path. No matter how big an amount she can earn from wrongdoings, she will still choose the right path. But unfortunately, women here get rejection and tags of criminal and 'ex-convict', so most of them choose to stay on the wrong path, they say, if it's like that, we will make money out of it."*

Respondents showed dissatisfaction with the criminal justice system and reported that they do not get support in any form from the government. Most of them shared their struggles to reintegrate into society without having a single penny in their hands. So, they suggested that the government should rethink its rehabilitation policies in prison, by giving them confidence, up-to-date skills, and proper certificates that can help them earn a respectable job after imprisonment. Women leaving prison must get training and information about what they can do if they get in trouble or lack support; they should get information about NGOs and Government institutions that help those in need. Some of them suggested special economic support from the government, either in the form of a stipend or in the form of a loan, until they find ways to support themselves.

4.10. Conclusion

This study set out to explore the lived realities of female prisoners and ex-convicts in Pakistan, specifically from Adiala Jail, guided by five research questions. The findings highlight how women's experiences of incarceration and reintegration are shaped by structural inequalities, systemic failures, and deeply gendered vulnerabilities.

RQ1: Living Conditions and Post-Release Impacts

The study revealed that in most cases, women face severe stigma, financial instability, rejection by family, a lack of housing or employment opportunities upon release, and a lack of probation facilities. Many respondents described how reintegration was marked by discrimination, distrust, and limited agency in accessing legal or social support. These findings confirm feminist criminology's claim that women are treated within the criminal justice system in ways that neglect their gender-specific needs. Moreover, the challenges of stigma and exclusion after release multiply the trauma they endured during imprisonment, reinforcing their marginalization.

RQ2: Challenges During Incarceration

Inside prison, women reported overcrowded and unhygienic living conditions, lack of healthcare, poor food quality, and absence of privacy. Respondents described strategies of "survival" such as giving bribes to the prison staff for their basic needs, and for meetings they were allowed by the court to meet their loved ones, but prison staff often refused to arrange the meeting if they failed to give them money in exchange. Moreover, preserving vegetables without refrigerators or cooling beds with water in extreme heat, which exposed the absence of basic facilities guaranteed by frameworks like the Mandela Rules and CEDAW. Such findings underscore how the prison system deepens women's trauma rather than fostering recovery.

RQ3: The Role of the Prison System and Its Environment

The prison environment was perceived as punitive rather than rehabilitative. Respondents spoke of corruption, exploitation, and the complicity of prison staff in illegal activities. The institution thus becomes a place where inmates must choose between constructive and destructive paths without meaningful State support, echoing gender-responsive theory, which emphasizes the need for policies that

address women's distinct pathways to crime. Upon reintegration, the lack of State support often meant that women remained vulnerable to exploitation, thereby undermining the prison's role in rehabilitation.

RQ4: Rehabilitation Options

Rehabilitation programs were reported to exist in the form of stitching, embroidery, and literacy classes, but women described them as outdated, poor in quality, and disconnected from real economic opportunities. In contrast, NGOs like WAT provided more meaningful interventions through counseling, legal aid, and skill-based training. Still, the absence of a coordinated state-NGO approach limits the effectiveness of rehabilitation. The findings suggest the urgent need for updated, market-relevant, and psychosocially informed rehabilitation programs that truly address the reintegration needs of women.

RQ5: Nature of Crimes and their Impacts

The narratives revealed that most women were not regular offenders; instead, they were often manipulated, acted in self-defense, or became involved due to poverty, abuse, or coercion by male partners. Many undertrial prisoners were ultimately declared innocent, underscoring systemic delays and miscarriages of justice. These findings support the Gender Pathways Theory, which posits that women's criminal behaviors often stem from victimization, economic struggles, and relational pressures rather than innate criminal tendencies.

Across all research questions, the findings reveal a most of the women who enter prison face a cycle of trauma, starting with histories of abuse and poverty, worsened by prison conditions, and continued by stigma and rejection after release. The voices of the respondents highlight the inefficiency of the criminal justice system in recognizing and addressing women's lived realities. They called for alternative punishments for women with children, financial and social support after release, corruption-free institutions, and increased collaboration between the government and NGOS.

This research, therefore, calls for a paradigm shift in how the State conceives incarceration for women. Rehabilitation should not be treated as a privilege but as a necessity, informed by trauma-informed, relational, and gender-responsive frameworks. Only by addressing the structural, social, and psychological needs of female prisoners can the criminal justice system fulfill its rehabilitative role and reduce the risks of recidivism and exploitation by criminal networks.

Chapter 5

Policy Recommendations

The narratives gathered through this research reveal a criminal justice system that not only fails to protect vulnerable women but also further alienates them through inadequate legal aid, lack of psychosocial support, and the absence of reintegration mechanisms. These gaps call for urgent policy attention. The following recommendations are informed directly by the lived experiences of the women interviewed and aim to address the structural, legal, and social barriers that hinder access to justice and effective rehabilitation.

5.1. Specialized Reintegration Programs Post-Release

5.1.1. Specialized Case Management Team

Female ex-convicts confirmed that they are not supported in any way once they leave prison, nor do they receive training inside prison to prepare for challenges after release. It is highly recommended that the government of Pakistan, in collaboration with prison staff and NGOs working in this area, establish a specialized Case Management Team composed of a psychologist, a counsellor, and a social worker to support female ex-convicts after their release from prison.

5.1.2. Transitional Housing

Women face abandonment by relatives, divorce, and social isolation, which create difficulties in finding a safe place to live. As Nargis shares, “When a woman comes out of prison, she needs shelter first. The

government should provide some stipend for them for a while, until they get proper shelter and a job." Therefore, the government should either build a hostel or offer financial assistance to rent a house for at least six to twelve months. This period will help them find a job or start their own work, and later, they can transition back into society.

5.1.3. Community Reintegration Programs for Women

The female prison population is 1,330, according to the 2023 survey, making up approximately 1.5% of the total prison population. Although this number is small, it affects roughly 1500 families- when a woman is incarcerated, the entire family unit feels the impact. To support these families and assist in reintegrating these women into society, the government should implement a community reintegration program focused on rebuilding family relationships, encouraging community involvement, helping with job placement, and fostering social networks. As one of the respondents mentioned, “It’s hard for women to survive alone on their own.” This clearly indicates that female ex-convicts feel that it's difficult for a woman to survive alone after transitioning out of prison. Support is essential, and specialized community reintegration programs tailored to their unique needs can improve the reintegration process, ultimately helping reduce recidivism.

5.1.4. Employment Opportunities and Economic Strength

It was reported that women leaving prison often get approached by gangs involved in drug trafficking and other crimes because they know ex-convicts tend to lose their belongings, properties, relationships, and all forms of support when they leave prison. They also understand that ex-convicts are dependent and vulnerable, and they exploit this vulnerability. This raises the risk of reoffending. To combat this, the government can assist them in finding jobs suited to their skills by offering tax incentives and programs to encourage companies to hire ex-convicts.

As suggested by Kausar, “The government should do something for a woman leaving prison, should get some security and support, either give them money for 2 years, in that time, I am sure she can do something for herself and can be independent.” They can provide small loans, enabling women to start their own businesses based on the training they receive. If women are in prison or dependent on a family member, the government can help them find employment or access a loan. They can also offer government jobs in

facilities like Dar-ul-Aman or Government Silai Centers, so women can practice their skills and earn a decent income.

5.1.5. Improved and focused Vocational Training

Vocational training is offered to incarcerated women in prison, but some ex-convicts say these programs are basic, and the certificates they get are just copies listing the prison's name. They can't use these certificates in society because of the stigma attached to them. To address this issue, the government could implement the following steps.

In order to reduce inmates and ex-convicts vulnerability resulting from dependency and lack of purpose in life, it is suggested for prison administration to hire a career counsellor who can help them discover their talents, motivate them to undergo training, and inform the prison staff about the types of vocational training needed in case someone requires special skills, such as photography, which are not currently available. This step is important because when asked about the perception of ex-convicts about prison, they reported it as punitive centers, and they also reported a lack of support and hopelessness when transitioning out of prison. To address these issues, it must be made mandatory for all incarcerated women to receive educational training and at least one vocational training option, as ex-convicts reported that "vocational training was not mandatory for everyone". Consequently, those already inclined to recidivate did not participate in these trainings.

5.1.6. Improve the level and quality of vocational training

Ex-convicts reported that in education-related training, they teach basic skills like how to read and write, which is also important for women who have never received an education. However, for those who have completed matriculation or FSC, there should be advanced training and classes to encourage them to further their education. One respondent mentioned that in some vocational training programs, such as those in makeup and salon work, the instructors were not well-qualified or lacked knowledge of the latest trends and techniques (for reference, see Section 3.7.1). There should be qualified instructors appointed to train women in incarceration. Moreover, additional up-to-date vocational training should be offered, such as digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy, so that women, upon reintegration, know how to earn money and manage their expenses effectively.

The certification they receive after training should never mention the prison's name or any NGO working with prisons (for reference, see Section 3.7.2). Instead, prisons should collaborate with large companies that offer similar skills and can provide instructors from those companies. The certificates should hold value and can be offered through various collaborations with reputable institutions like NACTTC and TEVTA, ensuring that these certifications are truly recognized and valued.

5.1.7. Mental Health Support

When a woman enters prison, she leaves her family, her children, and faces trauma if she hasn't committed that crime, and faces guilt if she has committed that crime. She is introduced to a new environment where a lot is happening around her, and she needs someone to guide her on how to manage her emotions positively and what she can do to improve her life after release. Respondents reported they faced anxiety, unknown feelings, lack of sleep, fear of coming out of misinformation, and difficulty in adjusting to a new environment, which later converted into high blood pressure, other diseases, and the unexpressed emotion when stressed shaped the forms of panic attacks and depression (for reference, see Sections 3.2). These vulnerabilities can make individuals more susceptible to drugs and abuse, and if not addressed, they may lead to rebellion and recidivism. While the Women Aid Trust does provide a psychologist in prison who offers lectures, support, and counselling, one psychologist is simply not sufficient to meet the needs of all inmates.

So, there must be a mandatory mental health assessment at the Time of incarceration, and therapy sessions must be provided to every woman dealing with trauma and help them deal with the prison environment, especially after release, which can help them reintegrate.

5.1.8. Peer-based Support Groups

Although WAT provides peer support and assists them in vocational training and reintegration, it should be done professionally by establishing a peer-based community that offers a safe space through storytelling sessions, peer advice, and success stories of ex-convicts. This can highlight the importance of reducing recidivism and completing prison time by learning skills that help them reintegrate. Such a community can also ensure peer support and introduce them to a new community that can help them survive and support others.

5.1.9. Protection of Personal Belongings and Household Items

Ex-convicts reported that during their arrest, they were not given sufficient opportunity to safeguard their valuable items (for reference, see section 3.4). When they returned, they could not locate these items, either because they had been stolen or because the police had taken them during the search right in front of their eyes. In cases where both husband and wife were arrested, they found nothing upon their return. To address such issues, the case management team I mentioned earlier can either carry out this task themselves, hire a social worker, or collaborate with an NGO working on women's incarceration. They can document every household item beforehand and request the owners to hand them over to a trusted person, who then signs a record. This way, they can report any missing items after reintegration.

5.1.10. Documentation and Legal Identity

Some of the ex-convicts reported that they did not have any legal documentation at the time of their arrest. In two cases, women had undergone divorce; they never applied for a CNIC, their husbands never handed over their marriage certificates, or they were lost, resulting in no proof of their relationship. They faced threats from their families, which prevented them from seeking help and hindered their ability to obtain new documentation. To prevent such situations, their legal documents should be collected into their files during imprisonment and returned to them upon release. In cases of lost documents, they should receive special assistance and a streamlined process to obtain their legal and educational documents. For women who have given birth in prison, their children must be provided with a birth registration certificate before they leave custody.

5.1.11. Safety from Domestic Violence and a Special Reporting Mechanism

Women experiencing domestic violence must receive specialized support, and there should be dedicated units in the police force staffed by women to handle such cases. In matters of domestic violence and harassment, women often fear reporting because it involves lengthy procedures. Additionally, many women depend on their husbands, and in cases of harassment, stalking, or blackmail, they prefer to remain silent rather than report, as this can lead to character assassination by society and men. Such consequences often result in isolation, homelessness, and numerous other issues. To address this issue, special offices for reporting such cases should be established, and these women should be provided with support, protection, temporary housing, and legal aid to secure custody of their children.

5.1.12. Public Awareness Programs for Reducing Stigma

Societal behavior and acceptance are as vital in reintegration as government support and financial stability. We humans cannot live in isolation, and when someone is excluded out of fear of association or stigma of labels like ‘criminal’ or ‘ex-convict,' they feel rejected by society. Those who reoffend often say they are showing society that if they believe us to be bad people, we will act badly. Zubaida shared a story of her friend from prison, involved in drug trafficking; when asked why she didn’t repent, her friend replied, “If society considers me a criminal and bad, and I have labels on me, even if I do everything right, they will still treat me like a criminal; they don’t give me respect. I don’t get any benefit from following the right path, at least here I am earning good money, I can’t change people’s thinking." Nargis, Faiza, Zubaida, Ayesha, Rabail, Kausar, and Natasha expressed concern that society doesn’t trust them because of the labels attached to them. It hurts and questions their efforts to avoid reoffending. While societal ideas and beliefs are hard to change, it’s not impossible.

A human rights lawyer and advocate of the Supreme Court corroborated these concerns, highlighting the challenges her clients encountered due to the lack of public awareness regarding legal rights. She emphasized that the issue is not confined to uneducated populations; even educated women are often unaware of their rights. According to her, the responsibility to address this gap does not rest solely with the government but must also be undertaken collectively by society. She stressed the importance of mobilizing groups of individuals, rather than relying solely on leadership, to advance this cause. Furthermore, she identified social media as an effective tool for awareness-raising, noting that even under-resourced communities often have access to these platforms. She concluded by asserting that it is imperative to act collectively and urgently to address this issue.

The government, in collaboration with the media, can run campaigns to change people's perceptions of prisons and ex-convicts by sharing successful stories through movies and social media. Religious scholars and preachers can encourage the public to engage with ex-convicts by drawing on religious ideologies to foster community trust and reduce hatred and rejection. Local community leaders, such as respected individuals in villages whom people follow, could also be involved to ask people to do good to them, support them, and be kind.

5.2 Prison Management Reforms

Our prison doctrines state that rehabilitation is prioritized over punishment, yet nearly all respondents see prisons as places of punishment. To change this perception, the government could consider the following actions:

5.2.1. Capacity Building

Prison staff should be appointed thoughtfully and provided with regular training in kindness, philanthropy, and their role as facilitators in rehabilitation, rather than merely enforcing discipline and punishment.

5.2.2. Incentives for Capacity Building

The language used by the police and prison staff should be humane, gentle, and non-violent; they must be aware of mental health issues and understand that their primary goal is the rehabilitation of incarcerated women. They should be motivated by offering them special monetary rewards and incentives, such as promotions and verbal recognition.

5.2.3. Transparency and Accountability

There should be a system in place for reporting misconduct, neglect, or abuse by prison staff or any other incarcerated woman. A committee could be established to independently oversee the monitoring of the prison's conditions and the treatment of its inmates. The quality of food should be maintained, and basic necessities, such as a fridge and proper ventilation in the summer, should be provided. Rehabilitation focuses on improving behavior; the lack of quality food and necessary facilities can never motivate a convict to improve their conduct.

5.2.4. Data Collection

Prisons should maintain, organize, and regularly update their data on their websites to support data collection and inform policymakers. Currently, there is insufficient information available on the websites, which also contributes to the lack of research in this area; researchers encounter difficulties in gathering data. Therefore, it is recommended to maintain data effectively to enable further research.

5.2.5. Inter-Institutional Activities to Promote Coordination

The Ministry of Human Rights, together with the Prison Department, NGOs dedicated to the cause, and social workers, can collaborate to conduct further research, develop policies, and oversee incarceration and reintegration processes. This cooperation will enhance the prison system, reform police practices, and support the human rights of incarcerated women and ex-convicts, while also aiming to reduce recidivism.

5.3. Police Reforms

Special reforms are needed for cases involving women. Rabail reported that police interacted with her rivals using offensive language and, in front of men, threatened to strip her if she refused to sign confession papers. She falsely confessed to a crime she didn't commit. While not all police behave in this manner, some exploit women who lack family support. There is a critical need for training police on properly handling marginalized individuals, especially women. Female officers should be available to handle such cases, and no officer should question the accused without a lawyer present. Courts should not accept investigations conducted without legal representation.

5.3.1. Training on Sensitization and Human Rights

When the police's motto is "*hate the crime, not the criminal*," it's crucial to give them structured training that embodies this idea. Regular contact with crime scenes and sensitive cases can sometimes make officers become desensitized, which might hinder their ability to act fairly and compassionately. Therefore, police training programs should focus on human rights education, highlighting the need for a humane and respectful approach, especially when working with women, children, and religious minorities. Furthermore, this training should help officers understand their broader role in promoting social reintegration, viewing them not only as law enforcers but also as agents of rehabilitation and trust-building within the community.

5.3.2. Accountability and Monitoring

The government should establish an independent oversight body dedicated to monitoring and addressing grievances raised by ex-convicts regarding police misconduct, including harsh treatment, bias, or harassment. Additionally, a formal mechanism for the systematic review of police performance should be introduced, involving regular audits of officers' conduct concerning reintegration policies and crime

control practices. These measures would not only promote accountability within law enforcement agencies but also enhance trust in the justice system by protecting the rights and dignity of individuals undergoing reintegration.

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Appendix

Interview Guide:

Reintegration Experiences of Female Ex-convicts of Adiala Jail: A Narrative Analysis

Explanation of Interview and consent:

Explanation: I am conducting research aimed at capturing the life experiences of women after prison and how their prison experiences change their lives. Through this research, I want to inform policy so that further research can improve the lives of women after prison. If you have any questions regarding this research now or even if they come up during the interview, you may ask anytime, I will answer them first and then move forward.

Consent

Participants will be informed about the research in their language, including procedures for using pseudonyms and maintaining confidentiality. Informed consent will be obtained either verbally or in writing for audio recording and the use of the information they provided. They will be assured that they can request the removal of any statement, word, or detail they do not want included, and such information will be handled with strict confidentiality.

Basic Information of the Respondent:

- Name (pseudo)
- Age
- Date and year of birth
- Place of birth
- Education
- Occupation
- Source of income
- Family background
- Marital Status
- Year of marriage if married.
- Husband's information (age, education and occupation) if married.

- Number of children and their ages
- Information about In-laws (number of people, family background, where they live, and the respondent's relationship with them).
- Type of crime

Objective 1: To analyze the life conditions of the female ex-convicts from their own perspectives.

Major Question: What living conditions are faced by female prisoners, and what were their personal experiences with the Pakistani prison system?

Sub-Question:

What difference do you feel in your life conditions pre- and post-prison?

Is there a change in your relations with your close and extended family members? If yes, what do you feel about that change?

Can you share your experience with the community members? Did it change before and after going to prison and how? What role did it play in your reintegration? Did it affect your mental health?

How did your friends react to you going to prison? Did they support you? Are you still friends with them? If not, do you have friends now? Is your social circle the same as it was before prison?

After prison what emotional and psychological challenges did you encounter? How did you deal with them?

How would you explain your support network? If you have any?

Do you feel safe where you live now? Were there any challenges to find a place to live after coming out of prison?

Are you satisfied with your current living situation? (follow up questions)

Did your health get affected after going to prison? (follow up questions if yes)

How would you describe your financial situation? What challenges you encounter to manage finances after prison? How did it change before and after prison?

Did you receive any social services or any support from society or government after coming out of prison?

What do you like to do when you are free?

Do you feel that you have control over your decisions, how decision making in your life changed pre- and post-prison?

What do you want from life now? What are your goals and future aspirations?

Do you feel that you are discriminated against in society? (If yes, please explain how and when do you feel that?

How would you explain your confidence and self-esteem now and before prison?

What is your biggest challenge in your life now?

If given a chance, would you like to move to some other place? If yes, why?

Is there anything you want to say as your message to society or government?

Objective 2: To analyze the specific challenges faced by female ex-convicts during and after incarceration.

Major Question: What are the specific challenges faced by women during and after incarceration that affect their reintegration into society?

Sub-Questions:

Can you share what did you felt when you entered the prison?

Can you describe the condition of prison, its infrastructure? How did it affect your mental health?

What were some of the major challenges you faced in prison?

Right after entering prison and realizing that you are separated from your family, what emotions did you feel and for how long did you feel those? Were you allowed to meet them? What procedure was followed for meetings and were you satisfied with that?

How was your experience with the prison staff? Can you describe their duties and their behavior with different prisoners? Did you feel any bias in their behavior? If yes, why do you think there was a bias?

What did you think helped you (an emotion, person or a staff member) in the prison to get through that time? What was your support system? And why?

Was there a system in prison to earn money? And how was it effective?

Did you catch any disease in prison? In such cases, what is the system for prisoners and how effective is it? Were there any common diseases you observed?

Were you aware of the legal matters? If yes, how? If No, why? How do you think the legal support and advice should be given to prisoners?

Are there any children in prison with the convicts? How were they treated?

Was there any gang system inside the prison? If yes, can you please explain?

Anything specific you want to share about prison?

What is your advice for the other women facing the same situation?
What do you want to advise the government to better the prison system?
Do you think that the prison system of Pakistan is designed as per the needs of women? If yes, how? If no, why do you think like that?

Objective 3: To discover what role the Prison System and its environment plays in the lives of ex-convicts in Pakistan.
Major Question: What is the role of the prison system and its environment in reshaping the lives of female prisoners, and how does it affect them after their reintegration into society?

Sub-Questions:
How did life in prison and its experiences change your outlooks towards life? How would you describe that change?
Did you find any similarity in the life of women inside and outside prison? If yes, can you please explain?
Do you think prison changes the mindset of a prisoner and plays any role in keeping them away from crime? If yes, please explain what made you think this? If no, can you explain why you said that?
Were there any educational or vocational training in prison? If yes, do you think they play any role in reintegration?
How do you perceive our justice system after interaction with prison and court staff? How do you feel about your interaction with them?
Do you think the prison system follows rules? Which rule or practice was the most difficult for you to follow? How did it affect you?
Were there any counsellors or mental health services available? Do you think that these services are important and how?
Do you think that shared living space in prison and lack of privacy affect the inmates? If yes, how? If not, what made you think this? Does it affect self-image and personal boundaries of a prisoner after coming out of prison?
What do you think is the role of peer support in prisons? Was it available to you? If yes, how did it help you? If not, what made you feel that it's absent?

What are the changes that you would like to recommend based on your experience in prison, that can support inmates and their reintegration?

Objective 4: To explore what options were practically available for ex-convicts during their prison era in terms of rehabilitation programs and how effective those programs were for their reintegration into society.

Major Question: What rehabilitation options are available to women and how well do they respond to the needs of female ex-convicts?

Sub-Questions:

What was your routine in prison?

What kind of rehabilitation activities were available?

Were there any programs related to education? If yes, please describe them?

Did the prison provide any vocational training? If yes, can you provide me with the details? How were they?

What was the structure of those plans and how were they delivered? Did you feel any difficulty in participating?

Did you receive any kind of certificate or any proof of qualification after completing the trainings?

Was there a choice or were all the activities mandatory for the inmates?

What did you feel about those activities/programs? Were they teaching you to cope with the time in prison or to start a new life after prison?

Was there any financial literacy training provided for the inmates?

In your view, are these programs practical or not? If yes, please explain? If not, why and what could be the alternative in your opinion?

Do you think that the training staff was professional? How did they treat you? What was the role/behavior of prison staff during those activities?

Were there any psychological or substance abuse training provided for the inmates? If yes, did you feel they were effective?

Do you have any idea where did they came from; they were from the government or an NGO? If both, was there a difference between the mechanism of two? If yes, please explain.

After being released from prison where you provided with any support service or a follow-up program?

Do you think prison prepared you for reintegration?

How difficult was the process of finding employment for you? Did anything taught in prison help you in the process?

Do you think that these programs affect your self-esteem or confidence? If yes, how?

If I ask you to rate the rehabilitation programs in prison in their overall effectiveness in aiding the reintegration? How would you rate that?

Do you have any suggestions for rehabilitation programs? If yes, please share.

Objective 5: To inquire into the relationship between the nature of crime committed by women ex-convicts and the degree of marginalization it resulted in their lives after incarceration.

Major Question: What type of crimes were the respondents involved in, and how did the nature of the crime committed impact their lives after incarceration?

Sub-Questions:

Do you think that inside prison you were treated was based on the crime you committed?

Do you think the behavior of staff and other inmates changed based on the nature of your crime; did you feel single out? If yes, please explain? If no, did you observe this situation with any other inmate?

Do you think that there is any difference between the treatment of staff with the inmates that commit violent or offensive crimes and those who commit non-violent offenses?

Do you think this type of crime affects the access of inmates to the resources, rehabilitation programs and vocational training in prison?

Do you think the way society treats you is somehow based on the crime you committed? Did you ever think if you had been charged with some other crime, you would have less marginalized?

Do you feel that the type of crime you were charged with affected your relations with family and friends? If so, can you tell me more about it?

Do you think the nature of your crime affected your employment opportunities? If so, please share based on what instances you felt that?

Did you face any discrimination from NGOs, social services and support networks based on the type of your crime?

Did you feel at any point in your reintegration process that the label of your offence influenced trust building with family and community members?

Do you feel that certain kinds of crimes carry more stigma and result in more marginalization? If yes, which type of crimes are those? How does the stigma relate to it affects the involved women and their long-term life outcomes? Did you feel the same for yourself?

Anything you want to share related to it? Do you have any message for prison, society and justice system regarding the degree of marginalization based on crime?

Questions for women with children:

How many children do you have?

What age are they?

When you were in prison, were they with you? If yes, what did you feel when you entered prison with them?

Was there any system for children in prison?

How would you rate that system? Were you satisfied with that?

What feared you most about your children in prison?

What was the behavior of prison staff with your children? Was it affected based on your status as an inmate or on the basis of your crime in prison?

Was there a system in prison for education of children? Were you satisfied with that?

Can you share the details of the diet plan they follow for children in prison?

How did the prison experience change the life of your child/children? How did it affect his/her mental health?

<u>For women separated with their children:</u>

Who looked after your child/children when you were in prison?

How do you think your incarceration affected your relationship with your children?

Was he/she informed about your imprisonment? If yes, how did it affect your child's mental health and habits?

Did your children come to visit in the time of your incarceration? If yes, how did you feel when they used to visit? Was there any change in their behavior? How did they deal with your absence?

What do you think was the biggest challenge that made it difficult to rebuild your connection with your children during and after incarceration?

Did your community and family support you in rebuilding your relationship with your children after incarceration?

What is the challenge that use face as a mother now? How do you deal with your responsibilities as a mother along with reintegration challenges?

Did you have any mental health support, or any support system or did you get any training on reconnecting with children after traumatic incidents after incarceration?

Were the prison environment and policies supportive enough to maintain a good connection with your children?

Do you think the prison system keeps in mind the needs of incarcerated mothers and teaches them to manage the relation during and after incarceration?

What do you aspire for your children in future? What are the challenges you face now to aspire to your goals for your children?

Do you think your experience of imprisonment affected your parenting?

What do you want to suggest for other mothers in prison and in reintegration? What do you want from government and society?