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WOMEN'S HEALTH IN INDIAN PRISON

(Looking over the Impact of Imprisonment and Access to Health Services of Women Prisoners in India)

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Abstract

It has been found that there has been a limited provision of health facilities in the prisons of women in India. Due to a lack of infrastructure, the unwillingness of jail authorities, and funding-related problems, the overall health and medical support system for female inmates is not at all satisfactory despite several government proposals. However, given the updated and amended national Prison Manual, thorough progress is being witnessed as long as the health perspective of female prisoners is concerned. However, there are several other existing problems like taking care of mental health issues of the female offenders which are deliberately neglected but need prominent and immediate attention to achieve sound health goals among the inmates in a true sense. The paper here had attempted to give a detailed insight about the health condition of the women prisoners in India. It has provided in-depth data based on the availability of the health and nutritional facilities within the female prison where women convicts are serving their sentences. Government initiatives that are yet to be initiated like offering standard calorie diet to the women prisoners, health screenings, and inspections from the side Chief Medical Officer have been discussed here with necessary elaboration.

KEYWORDS: women prisoners, health, mental health

Introduction

In order to ensure the decent health condition of female inmates there are several regulations in terms of frequent medical check-ups, regular visits of medical officers, separate wards for females in jail hospitals, and others. However, despite such rules and recommendations as described in the National prison Manual, the overall health scenario in the prisons of women in India is not very promising. In reality, in most of the jails separately operational female wards or adequate lady gynecologists are not available. Female health in prisons does need special attention since it consists of mental, physical, sexual as well as reproductive health conditions.

In the case of mental or psychological illness, inmates are often kept in prison without proper treatment due to a lack of alternative facilities. In many cases, prison staff does lack basic knowledge regarding the gender-specific needs of female inmates to meet their basic needs on a temporary basis in absence of proper and permanent staff to handle female prisoners (Joshi, 2022). In terms of nutrition which is closely related to sound health, several prison visits have revealed the fact that women are served foods having lower calorie intake and less nutritious value as compared to male inmates. As per several inspections, the kitchen and dining areas of the prisons are pretty unhygienic. Extra nutritious needs of females given their menstrual and reproductive needs are often neglected in Indian prisons despite having prominent guidelines (Government of India, 2018). Moreover, there are several Indian states where overcrowding is a serious issue among female inmates due to the absence of adequate prisons dedicated to women only. This over-occupancy leads to several health-related constraints due to unhygienic and inappropriate standards of living. Due to the very smaller

number of women in prisons, the inmates are often captivated in a jail which is far from their actual residence and it eventually becomes very difficult for their near and dear ones to visit them frequently. Thus, fear of losing touch with relatives and subsequent loneliness put an adverse impact on the mental health of women prisoners in terms of depression, anxiety, and nervous breakdown (Natu and Narayan, 2022).

As per the reports in 2015, a total of 51 female inmates died during their respective spans of imprisonment out of which 48 deaths were reported to be natural and the remaining 3 deaths were due to suicidal attempts (NCRB, 2015). These numerical figures also raise a question in terms of the availability of required healthcare facilities to support the inmates to survive critical health conditions. Nevertheless, it can easily be stated that prison authorities in India still have a long way to go in replicating their proposed recommendations in reality to ensure sound health conditions for the female inmates captivated in the prisons.

Methodology

The research paper is based on secondary data. Desk review of relevant literary sources based on the topic is performed to extract the required information.

Here, in this research, the narrative design will help in identifying the key aspects of the topic area that significantly includes the issues that the female prisoners face based on the poor health facilities, government initiatives for developing the scenario in coming years, and the nutritional facilities available there.

Status of health and nutritional facilities in the women prisons of India

As per the Government survey on female inmates of 144 Central Jails in collaboration with the National Commission for Women (NCW) and other NGOs, several issues have been highlighted out of which lack of health and nutritional facilities provided to women inmates are considered to be one of the prime concerns (Economic Times, 2018). Since the beginning, Indian prisons are mainly designed keeping in mind the needs of male prisoners. Thus, additional health needs of women in terms of menstrual as well as reproductive care are often unmet given the widespread and persistent history of gender inequality in the jails of India. Female inmates frequently suffer from post-traumatic disorder, anxiety, depression, and several other mental health issues leading to self-harming and suicidal tendencies. However, provision for mental health care is very limited which often fails to meet the needs of the inmates (Bergh *et al.*, 2011). During a dry period back in 2003, the situation turned out to be so pathetic that in several jails female inmates could get access to one bucket of water every four to five days on a sharing basis (Sen, 2021). Thus, the problem of overcrowding, lack of female staff and medical officers, lack of gender-sensitive training among the prison staff, provision of less nutritious foods, and unavailability of adequate menstrual, as well as pregnancy care facilities, constitute the basis of poor healthcare provisions for female inmates in India indicating the miserable hygiene and nutritional status among the women prisoners (Bhatnagar, 2019). Female prisons need thorough improvement on this ground in order to provide the inmates with a decent standard of living during their correctional period.

Given the present scenario, following the guidelines of the New Prison Manual, the physical health of female inmates is being taken care of more or less in all of the prisons. However, the mental health conditions of women inmates are often less prioritized. There is hardly any scope for counseling sessions regularly in any of the model prisons for women. They feel depressed and mentally disturbed since they do not have anyone to chat with. In most cases, women inmates are kept in prisons specified for females who are far from their actual residence. Thus, it is not always possible for relatives to meet them frequently.

Moreover, there are limitations from the end of prison authorities as well in terms of the visits of the relatives. Again, most of the female inmates belong to the reproductive age group and thus they are prone to several physical and mental health issues for which extra medical support is of immense need. In addition, female convicts have much less acceptance in the eyes of society since they are breaking the age-old norms of womanhood. All these factors together make an adverse impact on the mental health of the inmates leading to stress disorders, depression, and many other psychological complications (Upadhyay, 2021; Kaur and Roy, 2021). Furthermore, there is another problem in terms of the healthcare of the pregnant and postpartum female inmates in prison. In most cases, due to a lack of female staff and prominent antenatal care, inadequate medical support, and poor social support, it becomes very hard for pregnant women to survive their pregnancy periods behind the bars (Vajawat and Chandra, 2021). Thus, the situation is much more challenging for women convicts to survive their respective periods of imprisonment in absence of proper healthcare and medical infrastructure.

Government initiatives for the improvement of the situation

The Indian government, post inspection of subsequent survey results and related recommendations, has undertaken several initiatives to ensure the right to get access to proper and effective healthcare opportunities for female jail inmates during their punishment period. As per the updated National Prison Manual, the government has proposed to have separate wards of hospitals for women inmates in each of the prisons. The government has also thought of conducting regular health screenings protecting all kinds of privacy regulations to check sexually transmitted or blood-transmitted diseases, as well as mental illness or illness associated with drug dependency. As per the instruction of the government, the Chief Medical Officer of each of the prisons needs to visit the same on a regular basis (Government of India, 2018). There are also special provisions for elderly inmates and psychologically disturbed female inmates who need additional care in terms of therapy and counseling. Furthermore, in case of a shortage of lady medical officers, prison authorities have been instructed to collaborate with local hospitals to get adequate medical check-ups for female inmates. Additionally, the government has also proposed to provide the women inmates with a standard calorie diet and nutritional intake to secure their decent health during the correctional period.

Besides, female hygiene requirements are being taken care of by the prison manuals as proposed by the government (Government of India, 2018). Lastly, given the complications and limitations of keeping a large number of female inmates in Indian prisons, the government has also decided for granting special remission in 2022 and 2023 based on their good conduct and obedience towards prison discipline (Sikarwar, 2022). However, it will take a considerable period to implement all these proposals and recommendations effectively given the limited budget and manpower working for the judiciary system in India.

Impact on the women prisoners based on the situational development of health facilities

Considering the present scenario of India, it can be stated unhesitant that the number of female offenders is increasing at a much higher rate compared to that of male offenders (Masoodi, 2018). Thus, Indian prisons, which were historically developed primarily keeping in mind the male inmates, need to accommodate women inmates as well. Due to the shortage of space compared to the number of heads in female prisons and the lack of women-friendly infrastructure in jails in India, women prisoners have no other option but to go through a miserable, unhealthy and pathetic lifestyle during their period of imprisonment. Whether it be the availability of trained medical staff to tackle female-specific health problems as well as subsequent mental disorders or accessibility to proper sanitation facilities or adequate pregnancy care, prison authorities have miserably failed in almost every aspect. Despite having several government regulations and proposals, the unwillingness of jail authorities coupled with fund-related problems has led to a poor health scenario for Indian female prisoners. However, based on the findings of several surveys regarding the health conditions of women prisoners, the Indian Government has amended the Prison Manual where several positive steps have been taken to secure adequate health facilities. Gradually situations are getting normalized in prisons in India since regular physical check-ups are being conducted by the prison authorities as per government instructions (NHRC, 2018). Moreover, pregnancy care and elderly care facilities have also improved significantly compared to the past. However, the mental health of the inmates has still been a neglected issue even today when it is a proven fact that female offenders are more prone to mental disorders, depression, and suicidal tendencies as compared to males (Upadhyay, 2021).

Conclusion and suggestions

Situations are getting better day by day in female prisons of India in terms of improved medical facilities as well as frequent physical check-ups and proper care of each of the inmates having any kind of physical problem. However, mental illness needs to be the focal point now considering the fact that it has often been neglected due to a lack of infrastructure and appropriate resources. Due to overcrowding, distant imprisonment from actual residence, and subsequent loneliness, women inmates are more prone to mental disorders, depression, and suicidal attempts. It has also been found that the authorities have not taken any proper measures for the maintenance of sanitation leading to illness and spread of diseases.

In order to improve such an adverse mental health situation, it will be highly beneficial to start regular counseling sessions in each of the prisons. Moreover, frequent meetups with relatives will also help to reduce their fear of exclusion, keeping their mental health sound. For developing the cleanliness and hygiene within the premises of women jail, proper sanitation is required. It is required to provide women prisoners with sterilized sanitary napkins for the purpose of maintaining menstrual hygiene. The wash basin needs to be cleaned timely and fresh and safe drinking water to be provided in each cell. Thus, the future of the health scenario of female prisoners in India looks promising given the present initiatives and efforts from the end of the government as well as prison authorities.

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