

# Physical And Mental Health Of The Children With Incarcerated Mothers In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan: A Sociological Analysis

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## Abstract

This paper examines the physical and mental health of those innocent children who are experiencing jail life with their incarcerated mothers in different jails of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. These children are without the commission of any delinquent acts but are prone to undergo the jail life for the crimes of mothers discharging their looking after responsibilities. This study was conducted in four jails of the province, which include Peshawar, Bannu, Timargara and Mansehra. It was a qualitative study proceeded with 15 case studies conducted with jailed mothers through census method, and 46 in-depth interviews taken from the incarcerated mothers with children, jail staff, representatives of the Child Protection Commission, lawyers, children with jailed mothers, and jail based-female psychologists, physicians and school teachers. It was found that children in jail were suffering from physical problems in the degraded environment of the jails in the shape of eye burning and sight, dermatological issues like scabies and itching, asthma, muscular pains, rickets, bodily growth in view of ill-nutrient foods, irritation in conversation, insomnia and overall immunization-related issues at sampled jails. They also faced mental disorders like depression, anxiety, attention-deficit, loneliness, agonized state of future apart from imbalanced personality like behavioral problems in the shape of aggression and disrespect etc. The study recommends the availability of proper medical care, well-nutrient foods, counseling, recreational and rehabilitation facilities for children with their jailed mothers.

**Key Words:** Children with Incarcerated Mothers, Jail Environment, Physical and Mental Health

## Introduction

### 1: Background of the Study:

It is worth-under scoring that children are confronting with multiple problems till the maturity phase of the life. A segment of the child community is that where they suffer a punishment for no wrong doing being at the looking-after stage of development while entering into jail environment with their incarcerated mothers (Tadros et al., 2022). Jail environment is so miserable which exposes a child to such a situation wherein personality

emerges on the negative directions, leading him to open a criminal profile beside health-related inconveniences (Borschmann et al., 2020). These children accompany their incarcerated mothers who are entering the jail premises on account of various criminal charges. The age limit of such children varies from country to country laws, beginning from breast-feeding to pre-school and even school-going stage of the life. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, the number of children with jailed mother is surging over time which is the reason behind researching into this area (Butta and Siddique, 2020).

The problem of children with incarcerated mothers in jails is a world wide issue, existing in developing, underdeveloped and even developed countries with variety of magnitude. It is a social issue needs to draw the attention of state agencies and humanitarian organizations but the situation is not so despite of the fact that it is like a termite which is weakening and despairing the future of our young generation right at the time of their physical development stage. The presence of the issue is reflected by the following literature compiled on the basis of various studies conducted earlier across the globe (Rose and LeBel, 2020).

## **II: Physical Health of Children in Jail**

There are many adverse effects of jail life on human health, as the inmates have normally low socio-economic and education profile with little access to healthcare (Borschmann et al., 2020), and overcrowding, poor hygienic conditions/practices, limited opportunities of recreation, no open air in jail environment are detrimental to the inmates' wellbeing; rather it promotes contagious diseases like tuberculosis (TB), hepatitis, blood-borne ailments in the forms of schizophrenia and bipolar disorder across the globe. The rate of tuberculosis infection in jails could be as much as one hundred times greater than the rate outside the jails of the respective regions where the disease is common (Wallace and Wang, 2020). Whereas, Jones et al.(2020) have referred to drug abuse among the individuals with criminal record by adding that vast majority of the nations have either inefficient or minimal therapy in this regard. Further, drug abuse and other high-risk behaviors like syringe sharing etc. are common among inmates, promoting the rate of Aids transmission in prisons at faster rate as compared to a general community.

The inmate children, being victims of mistreatment or abuse or already in psychiatric healthcare needs, could suffer more serious

psychological health consequences due to the close jail environment. Health care workers shortage, medicines shortage, and limited availability of specialists' services in jails often increase these dangers (Mares, 2021). As a result, children cannot attain their freedom to "the enjoyment of the greatest achievable quality of physical or emotional health," as stated in the International Covenant on the Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. A higher incidence of high blood pressure, allergies, headaches, HIV/AIDS, poor health and obesity were found among those who spent time in jail as children (Takada et al., 2020).

Rose and LeBel (2020) have observed that if mothers are incarcerated, their children's physical, emotional, social and moral well-being is all time at risk. The moral, ethical and legislative challenges faced by the mothers with children locked up are harder for society to tackle. Infectious illnesses and mental health issues beside other related diseases seem to be more likely to affect the children. They suffer from poor sanitation, inadequate nutrition and inadequate medical attention behind the bars.

Due to poor environmental and sewage conditions in Pakistani jails, children with jailed mothers experience a greater range of physical, social and health concerns as compared to other states. The age limit for such children in Italy is three years whereas it is up to 9 years in Pakistan, a longer time in the prison probably altering their personality at maximum with more susceptibility to emotional and social difficulties. Therefore, living of children of these ages in prison alongside mothers may have a negative impact on the children's future ability to prove as productive members of the society (Ferrara et al., 2006).

Gul and Ali (2020) have pointed to the age factor of children with jailed mothers in Pakistan who were at high risk in the jail environment. In the year 2020, conversely to the legally defined age of five years as maximum, 134 imprisoned mothers had children with them

in prisons up to the age of 9 years and above. Because of insufficient funding to the jails for proper health facility, many children couldn't ensure their access to life-saving medical care despite of their mothers' repeated requests.

### **III: Mental Health of Children in Jail**

A mother's imprisonment at jail is considered to be a significant and protracted source of mental stress for her children beside other associated risk factors in their lives like absence of family members, insufficient financial assets, family dysfunction, and tense intra-parental relationship (Foster and Hagan, 2009). Mothers' incarceration is a stimulant of change in the life of their children generating multiple psychological problems, aggression, misbehavior, criminality, substance use and poor academic performance (Murray et al., 2012).

Zocher (2021) observed the disorder of mental health among children with jailed mothers three times more than that of general population, and 65-70 percent of the children involved with the criminal justice system had diagnosable mental disorder. He further added that more than 60% of the children with mental health illnesses were vulnerable to intoxicated substance. Children with jailed mothers were estimated with 30% to have been suffering from various psychological discomforts and were looking for extensive treatment.

Children in jails are more likely to undergo trauma such as taunting, incidents of violence and acts of aggression. Seventy-five percent of the children involved with the justice system reported having traumatic victimization, and 93 percent of children in a jail reported being subjected to tragedies like casualties, diseases, sexual behavior, depressed mood, paranoid delusions, panic disorder, perceptual inadequacies, compulsive disorder, fear, anxiety, and frustration. Suicidal ideation and attempts were reported in the worst instances (Comack, 2021).

Mothers' incarceration is traumatic for their children and other family members (Lockwood, 2018). Further, a child's psychological health may be negatively affected by the mother's incarceration, bringing social and emotional dilemma which include stigma and shame, detachment from male parents, residential destabilization, shift in caretaking, and creating family disorganization etc. (Murray et al., 2012).

Johnson and Easterling (2012) referred to the US society where children with incarcerated mothers in jails are more prone to exhibit internalizing issues at the age of 11-16 years. Whereas, Murray et al. (2012) observed a higher risk of mental health issues.

Zisook et al. (2007) quoted previous studies indicating that challenges to psychological health in children can have lasting effects on their maturation, as children whose stress begins in early childhood has a lower standard of living and greater difficulties with social and professional competence. Children with mothers in jails are more likely to suffer from depression and severe anxiety (Murray and Farrington, 2008a) and low academic achievement and poor vocational performance (Collica-Cox, and Furst, 2019).

Childhood is a vulnerable time for mental illnesses as it coincides with a time of rapid development in an individual's overall intellectual and cognitive capacities (Milavetz et al., 2021). Mental health issues with children are of special concern, generating problematic behavior and perpetuate cycles of generational disadvantage such as low academic success, criminal behavior and unemployment in future (Farrington et al., 2001). It is concluded on the basis of the literature mentioned in the preceding paragraphs that children with their jailed mothers are exposed to various kinds of physical and mental problems which may incapacitate/deteriorate their personalities. This study was guided by the theories mentioned in the below theoretical framework.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The major premises of the Ecological Systems Theory developed by an American psychologist, Bronfenbrenner (1992), include microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem wherein the environmental factors in the contexts of different levels of child development have been highlighted. The microsystems indicate closest and direct environmental contact of family members, friends, place of residence, schools, other care giving institutions and even their surrounding community. So, in the jail environment, the children have an intimate relation with their incarcerated mothers, prison staff and other inmates affecting their overall traits of personality. Children are immersed in a variety of microsystems, as mentioned above, and each of which interacts with one another to form the mesosystem. Whereas, the exosystem is a network of relationships between the environments-one of which may not directly affect the children but can carry an impact on them. The jail itself, the prison staff and any legal proceeding are the potential examples. A mother who suffers constant abuse and mistreatment may act out by abusing her own children, which is detrimental to the children's physical and mental health.

The macrosystem is the largest and most distant community or institutions having a significant impact on children, such as the criminal justice system. It becomes clear to say that children brought up in a prison environment are socialized in a different manner from that of home. It means that the ecological system theory propounded by Bronfenbrenner focuses on the socialization process of a child at different places with different angles of personality, demarcating the jail-based manners from those of home, school and other settings. Stokols (1996) has also pointed to jail's unfavorable environment as a source of poor, neglected and unstable personality.

Similarly, Goffman (1961) in his theory "Total Institutions" has mentioned that jails are the places of housing and labor where inmates are detached from broader community for a considerable time period, and they live a confined and formally supervised life. Inmates share the same experiences and exposed to the similar physical and social environments apart from the limited food accessibility, restricted recreational activities, lack of other basic necessities/facilities most importantly the medical care. The jail acts as an institution giving a quite different mode of socialization to the inmates which is normally unsuited in the outside broader community. It came to surface that both of the above mentioned theories are aligned with the present study as the factors of jail environment affected the physical and mental health of the children living with their incarcerated.

### **Statement of the Problem**

As mentioned in the preceding lines, children with incarcerated mothers are prone to diverse kinds of mental and physical health issues in the jail environment, making their personalities abnormal in almost all spheres of the life. Elevated levels of pre-trial detention, inadequate prison systems, deteriorating jail structures and substandard jail health care significantly contribute to the unsafe conditions in the prisons. In Pakistan, particularly in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the subject issue is getting aggravated over the time in view of various pushing factors and indifferent attitude of the state. Academic work is also rare because a substantial amount of research has been undertaken in the country to properly finger at the health problems faced by these children. Humanitarian organizations are also not exclusively mandated to work on the issue. That is why the present study was designed to investigate the physical and mental health of

children with incarcerated mothers in four selected jails of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

### Research Methodology

The present study, qualitative in nature, was designed to examine the impacts of jail environment on the physical and mental health of the children with incarcerated mothers in four different jails of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: Peshawar, Timergara, Bannu and Mansehra. Primary data was collected by conducting 15 case studies with the incarcerated mothers through census method. Moreover, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 jailed mothers, 05 each members of the jail staff, members of the Child Protection Commission, lawyers, and 08 mothers-accompanying children with the cognitive ability to answer, and jail-based 2 female psychologists, 2 physicians and 4 school teachers through purposive sampling technique. The primary data was analyzed through thematic analysis.

### Results and Discussions

Children with incarcerated mothers are an extremely vulnerable group, characterized by the physical and mental health problems alongside behavioral issues. It was observed that they developed health issues after have joined jail life with their mothers in sampled jails. Jailed mothers stated that their children had never complained about any kind of health problems before they accompanied them on entering the jail. It was found that the incarceration of mothers negatively impacted the physical, emotional and spiritual well-being of their children beside contagious diseases around there in the unhygienic conditions of the prisons. Inmates typically got a low standard of living and poor standard of hygiene in jail. The data further depict that children became physically weak after entering the jails beside other illnesses of eyes, stomach, skin and oral problems, disruptive

behavior, depression, attention-deficit, aggressive behavior, and personality disorders. An incarcerated mother narrated that:

"My children were healthy and had no health issues prior to my incarceration. Within seven months in the jail, they lost much of their weight. Due to the unhygienic environment, ill-nutrient foods and contaminated water-caused digestive disorders, they cannot eat properly. She added that whenever they eat something, the time or sometime later they vomit it, which weakened them bodily. Moreover, their sleeping has got disturbed by the 24-hour long lighting in the room they are living, which has led to the problem of eye inflammation. Besides, scabies and other dermatological issues engulfed their children there".

The doctor at jail verified the statement regarding various kinds of diseases to children as well as their jailed mothers in view of no hygienically proper environment, lack of housing services and other basic facilities which created a threatening situation to their physical and mental health.

It reflects that there was an unhygienic condition in the jails which resulted in multiple physical and mental discomforts/problems like eyes illness, scabies, ordinary itching, muscular pain, digestive disorders, body weakness, anxiety, stress, loneliness and other psychological trauma. On the other hand, proper medical treatment, medical laboratory and prescribed medicines were at large which multiplied the health-related concerns of the inmates. It is true that Pakistan, being a developing country, has financial constraints to meet the institutional requirements, that is why

meager allocation is made in annual fiscal budget for even the basic and significant necessities of human life like health and education. But when we compare it to the developed and other developing countries, these two primary human necessities—health and education are the prioritized sectors of their annual budgets. Such un-prioritized attitude of our country certainly has retarded the opportunity of access to health facility. Another responsibility lays on the shoulders of the jail personnel to skillfully manage within the allocated meager amount the priorities to mitigate the health-related concerns of the inmates. Moreover, recreational facility is essential for mental and physical growth of human body but limited space for the prisoners has restricted children from playing with one another in the jails, which further doubled their stressful conditions.

The mother's incarceration is further linked to a number of behavioral problems and poor outcomes, including aggression and misbehavior in early childhood, antisocial behavior and delinquency, drug use, mental health issues, and poor educational performance and outcomes, including personality disorders, depression, anxiety, and feelings of grief, attention deficit, aggression, and biting mothers. Most of the participants shared that these issues among children have developed in jail. Almost every child exhibited some signs of a mental disorder. Participants reported that their children cannot sleep due to trauma, fear, anger, grief, and a close jail environment. A woman participant, who was jailed on the charge of running away from her home, outlined that:

"My children are encountering serious mental issues and most importantly the attention-deficit one, as they are not giving response of my calling by name again and again even they aren't able to look at me. My elder son told me that all

this happened because of you. If you would haven't run away, we would be rather at our home. They are depressed, hopeless, angry, and worried about the people who put us in jail".

"Some other mothers and their children doubted their future when they go out of the jail, as their relatives will never accept them back at homes following the conservative culture and social stigma they earned through mothers' criminal acts".

A female psychologist in jail told:

"The mental health of children with their jailed mothers is a more serious issue than their physical health. Children have developed inferiority complex, loneliness, worry, anxiety, depression, shame and aggression, and even some children over the age of 7 years have penetrated suicidal tendencies. She cited an example of a male child who expressed his design to better kill himself instead of living anymore at jail. Likewise, they are beating their mothers and using abusive language which they learnt in the jail. Besides, most of the children are making the plans to exact revenge on those who put them in jail once they are released". She dubbed such situation as a borderline personality disorder.

She further added that most of the children have insomnia and severe eating disorders because sometimes they ask for food and sometimes food is in front of them, but they don't eat it. Disturbed sleeping is also an issue because some children cry when they are sleeping. Children between the age brackets of 6

and 7 years complained that their mothers neglect them, while their mothers declined their children's such complaint and rather regarded it their attention-deficit problem.

The above-mentioned statements show that most of the children cognize the fact that they will not find any caregiver once their mothers are released from the jail because of stigma and disgrace their mothers brought to the respective families. They openly held their jailed mothers responsible for it, and also for their confinement at jails without any offence. Some of them were found worried about their mothers to face an unfavorable repercussion if they are released from jail. In Pakhtun culture, the presence of women indulged in criminal activities is considered a stigma for the whole family even community. Pakhtuns give preference to supremacy of cultural norms over disgraced and disrespectful life. Besides, the act of running away by a woman is considered a heinous crime in Pakhtun culture which is severely dealt. It is an undeniable fact that poverty is a deep-rooted cause behind the divergent kinds of crimes in our society. A considerable number of the incarcerated mothers committed crimes due to the critical economic conditions of their families. Another reason behind women's criminality came to surface in the light of this study was the marriages beyond their consent and prior knowledge. In many of the cases women tied the knot with drug addicts who were not able to earn for their families and they (women) were with the only option to step out of their houses and sometimes become prey to be indulged in illegal activities.

It is noteworthy that attention-deficit problem on the part of children is the outcome of such kind of perceived situation which compel them to develop negative thoughts and suicidal ideation when the level of emotions gets heightened. Results regarding the physical

impacts on children with incarcerated mothers revealed in this study are supported by Paynter et al. (2020) who documented a list of health problems, including asthma, obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, neglected tooth caries and lack of immunization in those children whose mothers reside in prison. Turney (2014), in his descriptive analysis based on information of the National Survey of Children's Health (2011-2012), fingers at the health issues including respiratory problem, overweight and risk of migraines etc. Whereas about mental disorders, the study findings of Herrera (2018) are in line with these narrations regarding mental disorders of children like trauma, abuse, violent assaults, extortion, cognitive deficits, paranoia, anxiety, depression, frustration and suicidal ideation at jails. Similarly, Dirkwager et al. (2021) have focused on mental health issues to children at jails such as depression, cognitive disabilities, sleeplessness, high blood pressure, self-reported health conditions, communicable diseases, violent tendencies and strain symptoms as resultant phenomenon of mothers' imprisonment.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The present study concludes that the jail environment had negative effects on the physical, emotional and spiritual well-being of children residing with their incarcerated mothers in jail. The suffocated and unhygienic jail environment resulted in developing many diseases and other associated problems like scabies, rickets, slow body growth as per age, digestion disorder, asthma, obesity, hypertension, ophthalmological concerns, dental decay and improper immunization were there among the target children due to short space for living apart from lack of proper medical check-up, and non-availability of medical laboratory and medicines.

It is further pertinent to mention that the mothers' incarceration is linked with breeding of number of problems to the mental health and behavioral disorders to the target population.

Such poor outcomes include anxiety, depression, inferiority complex, loneliness, suicidal tendencies, nightmare, insomnia, attention-deficit, and different forms of personality disorders like aggression, abusive language, misbehavior and criminal tendencies.

It is recommended that the state needs to give proper attention to the welfare of juveniles and enact proper legislation to keep away 5-year onward aged children from jail environment and place them in houses under the state patronage. Children and their jailed mothers should be facilitated with the rehabilitative programs through various skills development and religious education. Jail staff ought to have polite attitude towards such children and also their jailed mothers. Provision of recreational facility as well as health facilities including proper doctors and psychologists' consultation, medical lab and medicines, proper sanitation on regular basis, and nutrient foods is a basic requirement of the children.

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