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Psychological Characteristics and Adaptation of Women Serving Sentences in Correctional Institutions

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Abstract: This article analyzes the psychological state of women serving sentences in correctional institutions and the psychological changes that may occur during incarceration. The study focuses on the psychological adaptation of incarcerated women, their emotional state, manifestations of anxiety and aggression, experiences associated with separation from family members and children, as well as changes in personal identity and perceptions of the meaning of life. A review of international research on the subject is linked to practical observations in the context of Uzbekistan. The analysis indicates that imprisonment may affect not only a woman's social life but also her emotional well-being, self-perception, family relationships, and maternal identity. At the same time, over time, processes of adaptation to institutional conditions, reconstruction of social relationships, and reflection on the future may emerge. Psychological support, maintaining family relationships, participation in employment and educational activities, and improving rehabilitation programs are of particular importance for the positive adaptation and subsequent resocialization of incarcerated women. The article substantiates the need to study incarcerated women not merely as individuals who have committed crimes, but as persons with distinctive psychological and social needs.

Keywords: incarcerated women, correctional institution, psychological state, psychological adaptation, anxiety, aggression, emotional state, maternal identity, psychological rehabilitation, resocialization, meaning of life, social adaptation

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1. Introduction

In today's rapidly developing world, crime has become an increasingly significant social issue. The study of crime, including the behavior and psychological conditions of offenders, represents an important area of psychological research. In particular, the study of women's psychology is of special importance because women's emotions, family relationships, maternal feelings, and social roles can significantly influence their psychological state during the process of serving a sentence. Following deprivation of liberty, individuals experience restrictions on their usual lifestyle, social relationships, and personal freedom [1]. Adapting to such conditions can therefore be a difficult and complex process. The imprisonment of women affects not only their social status but also their emotional state and processes of self-awareness. During the initial period of incarceration, women may experience anxiety, fear, psychological distress, and feelings of loneliness [2]. Over time, however, they are required to adapt to the institutional environment, become accustomed to established rules and regulations, and adjust to their new social status. Therefore, it is important to examine the psychological state of incarcerated women not only at a particular point in time but also in terms of the changes that occur throughout the process of serving their sentences. In Uzbekistan, women serving sentences in

correctional institutions also require psychological, social, and legal support. Therefore, studying the psychological characteristics of incarcerated women, identifying the changes that occur during their imprisonment, and developing effective approaches to psychological rehabilitation represent important and relevant issues [3]. In particular, comparing international experience in the study of incarcerated women's psychological conditions with the specific conditions of Uzbekistan has considerable scientific and practical significance. Kalliopi Megari and Eleana Argyriadou have also examined the mental health and psychological well-being of incarcerated individuals in their research. According to their findings, imprisonment can lead to social and cognitive deprivation,

which may contribute to deterioration in mental health and quality of life. More humane prison conditions and access to medical care are associated with better outcomes, whereas overcrowding, solitary confinement, and exposure to violence can exacerbate existing mental health vulnerabilities. Interventions may include a wide range of approaches, from peer-support initiatives and restorative justice programs to medication and cognitive behavioral therapy [4]. Among young female prisoners, deterioration in several quality-of-life domains, including mental health, physical health, environmental conditions, and social interaction, has been associated with increased symptoms of anxiety, depression, irritability, and anger six months after release. Among older incarcerated individuals, psychopathological symptoms, with the exception of suicidal ideation, have not demonstrated a clear association with quality of life [5], [6]. Depression remains one of the most commonly reported factors contributing to the deterioration of mental health among incarcerated populations.

2. Materials and Methods

Depression is also associated with an increased risk of suicide among incarcerated individuals. The prevalence of depression among prisoners has been reported at different rates across countries, including 85% in Pakistan, 82.5% in Egypt, 53.4% in Ethiopia, 51% in the United Kingdom, 49% in the United States, 46.1% in Norway, 44% in Uganda, 37% in Nigeria, 35.3% in Eastern Nepal, 29% in Iran, 27.1% in England and Wales, 24.9% in South Africa, 20.6% in Brazil, and 11.31% in Taiwan. Depression has also been reported to be more prevalent among prisoners awaiting trial than among those who have already been sentenced. Among prisoners in Ethiopia, several factors have been identified as being associated with higher levels of depression. These include chronic health conditions, a family history of mental health problems, alcohol consumption, low levels of social support, younger age, a previous history of mental illness, low monthly income, negative expectations regarding life after release, and limited employment opportunities. Substance use disorders are also highly prevalent among incarcerated populations. Substance-related disorders may be more common among female prisoners than among male prisoners, while approximately 25% of recently incarcerated men and women have been reported to have alcohol use disorders. Various chronic health conditions, including hypertension, HIV, diabetes, asthma, ischemic heart disease, and other long-term illnesses, have also been reported among incarcerated populations. Prisoners with chronic health conditions may be approximately three times more likely to develop depression. This association may be explained by factors such as persistent pain, beliefs that their illness cannot be adequately treated, and stress associated with living with a chronic condition.

3. Result and Discussion

The researchers concluded that stress, loneliness, loss of autonomy, exposure to violence, overcrowding, and limited access to psychological support represent important negative factors within the prison environment. These factors may interact with pre-existing trauma, a history of mental illness, socioeconomic vulnerability, and substance use, thereby intensifying their adverse effects on mental health. Female prisoners, in particular, represent one of the groups with substantial mental health needs [7]. Among

incarcerated women, deterioration in mental health, depression, anxiety, traumatic experiences, the need for social support, and difficulties in accessing healthcare services are particularly important concerns. These factors highlight the need for gender-sensitive psychological and rehabilitation programs that address the specific emotional, social, and psychological needs of women during imprisonment and after their release.

In Sheron Mathlatse Masekoameng's 2022 study, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight incarcerated mothers. The data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and Social Identity Theory (SIT). The findings demonstrated that separation from children had a profound psychological impact on incarcerated mothers. One of the most difficult aspects for these women was their inability to participate in their children's everyday lives. They could no longer directly supervise their children's upbringing, address their problems in person, express affection through physical contact, or observe their children's development closely [8]. As a result, some women experienced feelings of inadequacy and perceived themselves as being unable to fulfill the role of a "good mother."

The study also revealed that most of the participants' children were placed in the care of maternal grandmothers or aunts. An important finding of the study is that women's involvement in criminal behavior cannot be adequately explained simply by stating that they committed crimes because they were "criminals." In some cases, economic hardship, family pressure, abusive relationships, the responsibility of providing for children's needs, and intense emotional stress influenced women's decisions and life circumstances [9], [10].

Following incarceration, women are often unable to fully perform their previous identity and role as mothers who directly care for their children. Consequently, they may develop and adapt to a new maternal role. Masekoameng's study associates this adaptation with a form of parenting in which mothers remain involved in raising their children together with another caregiver, but from a physical distance.

Telephone communication was found to be particularly important. Phone calls were not merely a means of communication for these women; they became an essential mechanism for maintaining contact with their children, preserving their sense of motherhood, participating in their children's lives, reducing feelings of longing and separation, and maintaining emotional attachment. Thus, communication with children can serve as an important source of psychological support during incarceration [11].

One of the most significant psychological issues identified in the study concerns changes in personal identity. The findings suggest that imprisonment does not merely restrict a woman's physical freedom; it can also influence how she perceives herself and her social roles. In particular, incarceration may disrupt the maternal identity that previously formed an important part of a woman's sense of self [12], [13].

The study therefore demonstrates that understanding the motherhood experiences of incarcerated women requires more than examining the offenses they committed. Their lives prior to incarceration, family relationships, social environment, economic circumstances, experiences of violence, and relationships with their children should also be taken into consideration. A comprehensive understanding of these factors is essential for developing effective psychological support, family-centered interventions, rehabilitation programs, and resocialization strategies for incarcerated women.

Turning to the research conducted by Nataliya Vladimirovna Kasterina, its main objective was to determine how women incarcerated for the first time psychologically adapt to correctional institutions and to develop effective forms of psychological support for them [14]. A total of 290 first-time convicted women participated in the study. Among them, 117 demonstrated pronounced neurotic symptoms, while 173 had psychoactive substance dependence. The research was conducted in six correctional institutions located across four regions of Russia. Experimental and control groups were also established, with 145 women in each group.

According to Kasterina, the initial period of incarceration represents a particularly difficult stage of psychological adaptation for women. Adaptation becomes even more challenging when neurotic symptoms or psychoactive substance dependence are present. The study identified anxiety, aggression, neuroticization, and psychopathy-related manifestations as important psychological factors. External adaptation to prison conditions does not necessarily indicate internal psychological adaptation. In other words, a woman may comply with institutional rules and regulations while continuing to experience significant anxiety, aggression, psychological distress, and a loss of meaning in life [15].

The findings indicate that psychological adaptation to correctional institutions among women who have been convicted for the first time and who demonstrate neurotic symptoms or psychoactive substance dependence is a complex and multidimensional process. Therefore, psychological support should take into account not only women's observable behavior and compliance with institutional requirements but also their internal emotional and psychological conditions.

In Uzbekistan, legislation also recognizes the right of incarcerated individuals to receive psychological assistance through the psychological services of correctional institutions. Monitoring conducted by the Ombudsman at Women's Colony No. 21 has documented individual and group discussions with incarcerated women. The 2026 monitoring process examined their living and working conditions, opportunities to meet with relatives, access to medical assistance, and other aspects of their living environment. In 2025, approximately 300 incarcerated women underwent comprehensive medical examinations, which also included psychiatric assessment.

The psychological changes that may be observed among incarcerated women can be considered in several stages. During the initial period, women may experience intense stress and anxiety accompanied by changes in their emotional state. Prolonged exposure to stress may contribute to depressive symptoms, emotional indifference, irritability, or aggressive reactions. However, this does not mean that all women experience incarceration in the same way; individual psychological differences can be substantial.

Experiences Related to Family and Children

Separation from children may involve a range of psychological processes, including longing, guilt, anxiety, and internal questions concerning maternal identity, such as "What kind of mother am I?" These experiences may have a significant influence on women's emotional well-being during incarceration.

4. Conclusion

Over time, some women may gradually adapt to the routines and requirements of the correctional institution. However, such adaptation should not automatically be interpreted as evidence that their psychological condition has fully improved. A distinction should therefore be made between external behavioral adaptation and internal psychological adaptation. A woman may successfully follow institutional rules and routines while continuing to experience emotional distress, anxiety, loneliness, or difficulties related to her identity and future. For this reason, psychological assessment and rehabilitation should address both the observable behavioral adaptation of incarcerated women and their deeper emotional and psychological needs.

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