

# WOMEN IN PRISON

Analyzing the Misery and  
Marginality of Female Prisoners in Bangladesh



**DE CAGE**



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## Introduction

### Executive Summary

*Female imprisonment is one of the least-explored domains of the criminal justice system of Bangladesh. Memoirs of former prisoners and occasional journalistic initiatives have uncovered the fact that the current prison administration does not fulfil the basic needs, as well as the gender-specific needs of the female prisoners. However, a comprehensive, research-based analysis of the living conditions of female prisoners is still unavailable in Bangladesh. This study is expected to contribute to filling the existing research gap by documenting the views and narratives of the victims of the current system and by highlighting the priority areas for policy intervention to ensure humane treatment and long-term rehabilitation of female prisoners across the country. As such, the study will also inspire future researchers to further explore the issue and popularize the question/necessity of restructuring the criminal justice system of Bangladesh.*

### Research Objectives

The ongoing study has the following objectives:

1. To document the lived experiences and to analyze the current living conditions of female prisoners living across jails in Bangladesh
2. To analyze the causes of the current condition/ flaws of female imprisonment and to suggest viable alternatives/ solutions to it.

## **Research Questions**

The ongoing study will attempt to answer a few specific research questions. For the first objective of this study, the research questions are:

1. What challenges do female prisoners face while living in prisons?
2. What gender-specific needs are not being fulfilled under the current system?

For the second objective of the study, the research questions are:

1. What socio-political, economic, and administrative factors are responsible for the current condition of female imprisonment in Bangladesh?
2. What are the viable alternatives that can address the shortcomings of female imprisonment?

## **Background of the Study**

Imprisonment is one of the most applied state-imposed penal sanctions in Bangladesh. Being a former British colony, Bangladesh has inherited most of its penal laws and practices from the colonial administration. Critics argue that while a large number of new prisons have been built in Bangladesh in the post-independence era, the state has failed to ensure the overall safety and well-being of the prisoners living in jails in different parts of the country. The prisons of Bangladesh are still severely overpopulated, and the authorities are struggling to fulfill the basic needs of the prisoners. Consequently, prisons are popularly considered as a punitive institution created for incarcerating criminals and inflicting suffering upon them. The idea of correction is not compatible with the current prison structure and environment in Bangladesh. While sporadic news reports and editorials are available on the miseries of Bangladeshi prisoners, intensive research on the lives of prisoners is rare in the country. As the prisoners constitute only a minority of the overall population, their problems often remain invisible to the eyes of the civil society and the policy-makers. However, female prisoners, often described as “a minority within a minority,” remain particularly neglected within the prison population. Prison researchers have long argued that the prison system of the Indian subcontinent was originally designed and organized for men. The idea of a female prison or a female ward was just an afterthought in the system (Sharma, 2022). As the states of the subcontinent largely adopted colonial penal laws and institutions after their independence, the structure and environment of post-colonial prisons are not gender-sensitive and women-friendly. Women are subjected to structural harassment and multiple forms of violence within prisons, reflecting the gender-insensitive design of

Bangladesh's penal institutions.

### Statement of the problem

While imprisonment badly affects both men and women, scholars have argued that the consequences are more severe for female prisoners since they face greater social stigma than men, and their gender-specific needs are not fulfilled in prisons since the prison system is primarily meant and designed for males. Moreover, being a minority, their needs often remain unheard of and permanently unfulfilled. It is, therefore, important to document their lived experiences and represent them in the academic and policy domains. It is also necessary to find alternatives to the lives they are living in prisons through a critical analysis of the current system and counterposing it with standard practices.

Month	Convicted			Under Trial			Total	Prison Babies		Total
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total		Male	Female	
June 25	17809	822	18631	53011	1876	54887	73518	115	104	219
July 25	18419	836	19255	55782	1880	57662	76917	120	116	236
August 25	19353	853	20206	57533	1973	59506	79712	122	133	255
September 25	19241	803	20044	54653	1952	56605	76649	116	124	240

**Table 1: Statistics of Male and Female Prisoners and Children (under 6 years) with their mothers**

Female prisoners constitute a minority of the prison population in Bangladeshi jails. According to the data provided by the Department of Prisons (Table 1), a total of 2755 women were living in the prisons of Bangladesh as of September 2025. As such, female prisoners constituted only 3.59% of the overall prison population (76649). Among female inmates, only 29.14% were convicted prisoners. Others were under-trial prisoners detained in jails for political, civil, and criminal cases. As shown in the table, 240 babies had

to live with their mothers in the same month. Although numbers vary from month to month, significant changes do not occur in the percentages. The rate is also compatible with the global trends of female imprisonment. Lalli (2022) mentioned that women inmates usually represent an estimated 2-9% of the national prison population in around 80% of the prison systems in the world. In Bangladesh, the rate usually hovers between 3 to 4 percent depending on the political climate. For example, Table 2 shows that, in December 2023, the total number of female prisoners was 3028 (out of 84117), which represents 3.59% of the overall prison population. However, significant changes are seen after the fall of Sheikh Hasina in August 2024. As the regime changed, thousands of undertrial political prisoners were released, and the percentage of female prisoners (2106 out of 53685) increased to 3.92%. In December 2024, the percentage of female prisoners (2521 out of 66024 i.e. 3.81%) declined due to an increase in the number of under-trial male political prisoners. The number of women prisoners also continued to expanding in the later months as can be seen from Table 1.

Month	Convicted			Under Trial			Total	Prison Babies		Total
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total		Male	Female	
November, 23	19188	891	20079	64057	2018	66075	86154	129	150	279
December, 23	18418	821	19239	62671	2207	64878	84117	137	144	281
January 24	18781	833	19614	54085	2102	56187	75801	130	145	275
February 24	19184	877	20061	52002	2131	54133	74194	128	161	289
March 24	19481	846	20327	52274	2199	54473	74800	140	163	303
April 24	19053	873	19926	50020	2012	52032	71958	114	147	261
May 24	19587	813	20400	48643	2001	50644	71044	125	157	282
June 24	18433	808	19241	46588	1922	48510	67751	124	142	266
July 24	19027	837	19864	58233	1991	60224	80088	138	136	274

August 24	166 29	765	17394	34960	1341	36301	53695	107	117	224
September 24	1611 5	677	16792	33108	1353	34461	51253	106	114	220
October 24	179 38	758	18696	41109	1525	42634	61330	101	124	225

**Table 2: Statistics of Male and Female Prisoners and Children (under 6 years) with their mothers**

As shown in Table 2 and Table 3, female prisoners represent varying age groups. Young and early middle-aged women constitute the majority, as 75.71% of the under-trial prisoners are between 18 and 40 years of age. However, there is a significant presence of middle-aged and elderly women (24.29%), who belong to a different need group deservespecial treatment.

Division Name	Age 18-22 Years		Age 23-30 Years		Age 31-40 Years		Age 41-50 Years		Age 51-60 Years		Age 61-65 Years		Age 65+ Years	
	Male	Female	Male	Female										
Dhaka-1	2495	4	2202	22	1649	20	2102	9	853	0	122	0	89	0
Dhaka-2	1190	107	2239	179	2355	200	1921	116	555	29	148	3	57	1
Myensingh	256	11	1036	40	1040	36	651	26	189	9	55	2	30	0
Rajshahi	677	33	1897	81	1793	65	1146	37	517	15	175	7	118	2
Rangpur	237	10	760	44	1179	47	741	26	272	8	229	3	108	1
Chittagoning	1565	56	2708	181	4149	131	2605	78	754	20	311	11	180	2

Sylhet	410	11	1035	21	1004	23	652	10	196	2	92	1	76	2
Khulna	372	13	1411	49	1593	42	597	31	328	6	187	0	68	0
Barisal	274	14	531	14	761	30	605	15	157	3	20	1	10	0
Total	7476	259	13819	631	15523	594	11020	348	3821	92	1339	28	736	8

**Table 3: Statistics of Under-trial Prisoners Held in Prisons**

In Table 3, similar trends are seen. Young and early middle-aged women represent 70.36% of the convicted female prisoners. The comparatively higher percentage of middle-aged and elderly women (29.64%) under this category refers to the prisoners sentenced to long-term imprisonment.

Division Name	Age 18-22 Years		Age 23-30 Years		Age 31-40 Years		Age 41-50 Years		Age 51-60 Years		Age 61-65 Years		Age 65+ Years	
	Male	Female	Male	Female										
Dhaka-1	517	0	406	2	471	9	345	10	262	0	188	0	257	0
Dhaka-2	360	33	791	72	1260	81	690	25	283	9	98	1	56	0
My mensingh	54	0	176	5	242	24	243	6	127	2	31	1	18	0
Rajshahi	183	10	480	67	1015	43	867	19	365	14	160	3	113	2
Rangpur	64	0	225	4	433	17	478	14	224	4	125	3	102	1
Chittagoning	191	9	651	51	767	47	503	25	255	16	122	5	64	0
Sylhet	40	0	103	10	428	15	390	5	258	7	29	0	2	0
Khulna	174	3	381	19	576	29	631	25	335	12	97	6	77	5
Barisal	44	1	95	2	254	12	272	6	59	1	13	1	11	0
Total	1627	56	3308	232	5446	277	4419	145	2168	65	863	20	700	8

**Table 4: Statistics of Convicted Prisoners Held in Prisons**

At this point of the study, it is important to compare the number of female prisoners with the official capacity provided for them. Currently, Bangladesh has 74 prisons, comprising 15 central prisons and 59 district-level prisons. According to a report published in the Financial Express in August 2021,

the official capacity for female prisoners across all jails is approximately 1929 inmates, which is not sufficient to legitimately accommodate the entire female prison population. At present, there is only one specialized prison facility for women, namely Kashimpur Female's Central Jail, which is situated at Kashimpur, Gazipur. Other local central jails and district jails have female wards inside the jail (a jail within a jail); however, they don't provide any specialised facilities to women like it's done in comparison with Kashimpur. In 2020, a new female jail with modern facilities and a capacity of 300 inmates was inaugurated in Keraniganj, Dhaka, which was supposed to be the second specialized female penitentiary in Bangladesh.

However, in 2025, the Department of Prisons declared that the jail would be renamed as 'Special Central Jail' and would be reserved only for special prisoners who receive division (The Probashi, 2025). This represents the fact that women prisoners are not on the priority list of the concerned authorities. In India, there are 24 exclusively women's prisons among the 1339 prisons that are operating across the country (Dhanuka, 2022). There are also two open prisons (out of 64 open prisons) exclusively designed for women. Although both Bangladesh and India inherited their prison systems from the colonial authority, the introduction of the open prison concept suggests that India has made significant progress in its penal system in/over the last few decades. Ironically, there are instances of using the concept even during the colonial era. Sen (2002) noted/ notes that a certain 'leave programme' was introduced in 1867 in Lahore Female Penitentiary, which was the first specialized female prison in the Indian subcontinent. While the state of Bangladesh has adopted most inhumane penal practices from the colonial rulers, it has failed to pursue/emulate the few good things available in the colonial legacy. It is high time we restructured our penal institutions as per modern standards of the criminal justice process. Female imprisonment is the only tragic case that needs significant reform and modernization.

## **Legal Framework and International Standards of Female Imprisonment**

Bangladesh has signed and ratified several international documents and guidelines related to the fair treatment of prisoners. The most famous among them is the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules). However, the implementation of those guidelines is insufficient due largely to the state's indulgence in and overdependence on the colonial laws in day-to-day prison administration. In recent times, the governments of Bangladesh have taken a few legal

initiatives to improve the quality of female imprisonment across prisons. However, those initiatives are rarely applied due to bureaucratic negligence and a lack of human resources. This study presents a brief overview of the local and international laws and guidelines that is relevant to our study

### **The Prisons Act, 1894**

Being a colonial law, the Prisons Act, 1894, has many limitations that must be addressed by the modern-day prison administration. Section 27 requires that women be kept separate from male prisoners. The same section also requires that undertrial criminal prisoners be kept separate from convicted criminal prisoners, and that civil prisoners be kept separate from criminal prisoners. Moreover, section 11 discusses the appointment of female subordinate warders or matrons to ensure privacy, dignity and gender-sensitive treatment of women prisoners. Similarly, section 24 mandates that the searching and medical examination of a female prisoner is to be conducted by a female staff under the general or special orders of the Medical Officer. Section 35 requires that women prisoners must not be given any work unsuitable for their sex or health. The findings of our study shows that many practices in the current prison system contradict the concerned guidelines of the Prisons Act, 1894.

### **The Prisoners Act, 1900**

The objective of the Prisoners Act, 1900, is to regulate the transfer, custody and production of prisoners providing specific guidelines on the treatment of female prisoners. For instance, section 4 of the law requires that women prisoners be kept in places with gender-specific female facilities. Sections 30, 31, and 34 require a distinction between civil prisoners and criminal prisoners, mandate the separate confinement of civil prisoners, and prescribe less severe treatment for them. Again, section 8 mandates the transfer of mentally ill or unsound women to a mental health facility for better treatment. However, it is manifest from the everyday reality of 21st-century Bangladeshi prisons that the state machinery of Bangladesh has, yet again, failed to effectively implement the few positive aspects of a colonial law like the Prisoners Act, 1900.

### **The Special Privileges for the Convicted Women Prisoners Act, 2006**

This law is one of the few modern-day official attempts to improve the

quality of life of women living in prisons. Any woman imprisoned for more than one year shall be eligible for special privileges under this Act after serving 50 per cent of her sentence, including any remission. Under the Act, eligible female prisoners can receive 14 types of vocational training and rehabilitation services. There are provisions for ‘conditional release from prison’ as well. The Act requires the formation of a National Committee and District Committees for delivering special services to the women prisoners. However, provisions of the law remained unimplemented since 2006 until the Ministry of Social Welfare issued a gazette with the regulation titled ‘The Special Privileges for Jailed Women Convict Regulations -2020’ on January 28, 2020. Despite this attempt, the implementation of the Act has been described as patchy and limited in scope, and it has failed to achieve the level of impact expected during its promulgation. What is more, the Act declares certain categories of prisoners ineligible for special privileges, including prisoners sentenced to death or life imprisonment, those convicted of sedition or treason, and those convicted of offences under laws relating to explosives, arms, and narcotics. Since most women go to prisons for narcotics-related cases, this Act actually excludes a large group of female prisoners from its rehabilitation agenda.

### **The Probation of the Offenders Act, 1960**

Promulgated during the Pakistani era, this Act remains in force in Bangladesh, although experts have noted its neglect and underutilization in the post-independence era. Under this Act, the court can release a prisoner on probation of good conduct. With proper implementation, this Act could have brought significant development to the prison system by reducing the prison population through the release of first-time, minor, or female offenders on probation. However, governmental neglect, shortage of probation officers, absence of specialized organization, and lack of coordination has prevented the Act from creating the expected outcome on the prison system.

### **United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules), 2010**

The Bangkok Rules are a set of 70 rules adopted in 2010 to address the gender-specific needs of women facing the criminal justice system throughout the world. The Rules encourage governments to replace, wherever possible, female imprisonment with non-custodial measures to ensure the safety, security, and rehabilitation of an offender.

### **United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for Non-custodial Measures (the Tokyo Rules), 1990**

The Tokyo Rules are a set of guidelines that were adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1990. The Rules outline several viable alternatives

to imprisonment at pretrial, sentencing, and post-sentencing stages. The alternatives include verbal sanction, conditional discharge, furlough, education release, parole, probation, remission, etc. While not specifically designed for female prisoners, the Tokyo rules can show the path to finding alternatives to female imprisonment in Bangladesh.

### **The Corston Report, 2007**

Baroness Jean Corston (2007) stresses the fact that the offending patterns of women are different from those of men and imprisonment cannot address the underlying causes of female criminality. The report proposes the creation of a distinct, gender-sensitive approach in dealing with female offenders and suggests the use of community sentences and rehabilitation protocols instead of incarcerating women in prisons. The report also suggested the promulgation of gender-sensitive criminal laws and policies to deal with female offenders. While not an international standard like the Bangkok Rules or the Mandela Rules, the Corston Report (2007) has gained international acceptance for empathizing with female offenders and suggesting paths to the reform of the criminal justice system.

## **Narratives and Recollections of Women behind Bars**

Not many prison memoirs have been written in Bangla. Fewer have been written by female prisoners. This study reviewed several prison memoirs written by Bengali women incarcerated in different prisons of the Indian subcontinent, spanning the British, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi eras. The authors of these memoirs were usually political prisoners coming from an educated middle-class background; therefore, they do not represent the majority of the prison population who lack education and socio-economic stability. As such, their recollections help us to explore the miseries of female prisoners in the previous decades and build up a comparative analysis of the evolution of female imprisonment in Bangladesh. This study provides comprehensive overviews of the memoirs reviewed for the ongoing study.

### **ShilongJeler Diary (1988) by Surama Ghatak**

In this book, Ghatak (1988) described her experiences as a female prisoner who lived in several Indian prisons, chiefly in the district jail of Shillong, which was the then capital city of Assam. Ghatak was a leftist political activist and spent almost two years in prison from October 31, 1949, to June 27, 1951. In the meantime, she came into contact with prisoners from varying socio-economic backgrounds, especially from the indigenous communities of Assam. She criticized the insufficient infrastructure of female wards:

“Shillong is the capital of Assam. Naturally, it seems that the prison system in the capital will be very good. But that impression was shattered when we arrived at the prison, just by looking at one ward, you can get a rough idea of the entire prison...In the small ward, there were two small rooms for undertrial prisoners and convicted prisoners and two cells for the insane next to them. There was practically no yard.”

As a political prisoner living in an overcrowded prison, she opposed several prison practices and participated in hunger strikes demanding the fulfillment of basic rights of prisoners. In several parts of her book, she discusses how the socio-economic backgrounds of the prisoners have led them astray and eventually turned them into convicted criminals. As a leftist politician herself, she blamed the capitalist society for producing criminality and witnessed the prison system of India as an eventuality of colonial capitalism.

### **Deyal Diye Ghera (2022) by Matia Chowdhury**

Matia Chowdhury, a former minister of Bangladesh, spent almost two years in Mymensingh District Jail and Dhaka Central Jail from June 8, 1967 to February 22, 1969 and wrote a notebook-based account of her prison life titled ‘Deyal Diye Ghera’. The book is an important document for those who are eager to explore the evolution of the prison system in Bangladesh. Chowdhury (2022) primarily focused on the daily lives of the prisoners and their relationship with the prison administration. She started her account by identifying the female jail as ‘prison within a prison’:

“Its name is the female ward. In the language of the jail’s wardens, it is ‘family ward’. To enter the jail, one has to cross two locked gates. To enter the female ward, one has to cross three; the last lock is on the inside of the female ward door.”

Chowdhury (2022) showed her excellence in elaborating on the key principles of prison life including intramural hierarchy and administration which is still relevant for understanding the carceral apparatus of Bangladesh based on torture, intimidation and obedience. Her narrative brilliance is revealed in the following lines:

“Two groups of people run the jail. The first group is the government’s paid employees. The second group is the senior, convicted prisoners

who have been sentenced for a longer period of imprisonment. In the government records, they have two names - mate and *Pahara*. Mate is the highest rank, then *Pahara*. If they can demonstrate their efficiency and complete obedience to the rules and regulations of the jail and, simultaneously, satisfy the Jamadars and Jamadarnis, after spending several years, the prisoners get these promotions. The reason why they make a desperate effort to become mate and *Pahara* along with everything else is that they have to get more 'marka' or remission, and go home early. The number of days of remission for mate and *Paharas* in a year is on average 10-15 days more than the number of days of remission or remission that an ordinary prisoner gets in a year. For these few days, they become partners in various types of injustices committed by the Jamadarnis against ordinary accused, and take their side during the investigation of any incident."

The ensuing chapters of this study will reveal that these fundamental principles of prison have not changed significantly even after fifty years of the independence of Bangladesh. 'Torture of emptiness' and 'mental block', as described by Chowdhury (2022), are still governing the lives of prisoners. The sympathetic tone of the author intensifies readers' emotions when they read the following lines:

"Today is Purnima Tithi. It was getting late for the evening lockup. A few of them were walking with me in the field with permission from the Jamadarni. Namita, the judicial custody officer, suddenly said, 'Sister, look at the sky.' All of our eyes fell on one place - the moon, like a huge bronze plate in the sky covered with light clouds. We stood there transfixed, shocked by their words. One of them said, 'I am seeing Purnima (full moon) after five years.' Another said, 'Hey, our whole life is like a new-moon night, full of darkness. How can we see the moon?'"

### **Jeler Vektor Jel (2014) by Minakshi Sen**

Minakshi Sen was nineteen years old when she entered Calcutta Presidency Jail in the early 1970s. As a political prisoner, she spent nearly four years in jail and started writing memoirs after her release. 'JelerVektorJel' is the complete collection of her writings on jail. The first part of the book, Pagol Bari Porbo, deals with the lunatic women incarcerated in jails while Hajoti Number Meyadi Number deals with the general under-trial and convicted prisoners. Like Chowdhury (2022), Sen (2012) condemns the penal philosophy that is responsible for turning female prisoners into an almost invisible population. Most importantly, she does not see any merit in calling

prisons ‘correction homes’ until and unless fundamental changes are brought in the inherent philosophy and the traditional practices of the prison system. In her introductory notes, Sen (2014) writes:

“Prisons are built based on this theory that if the criminal is isolated from society, the criminal will be seized and society will be free from criminals. That theory is still running prisons today. And seeing that the helplessness or illness of a person is also being consciously or subconsciously considered a crime, instead of becoming like a hospital or a home, the homes are actually trying to become prisons hidden behind four walls. As soon as a person is put inside four walls, his/her life is hidden from public view. This isolation naturally makes him helpless. Even if s/he is the most violent criminal, s/he is completely helpless within the four walls; the helplessness of an individual, that too behind the scenes, naturally makes the walls of power grow higher around him/her. An equation of power and helplessness is created - is it possible that there will be no boasting, abuse, corruption or oppression of power?”

Sen (2022) also problematized the culture of administering prisoners through prisoners by empowering senior, convicted prisoners over the rest of the prison population. In her opinion, this mode of administration can hardly improve the character of prisoners, since it is based on the above-mentioned equation of power and helplessness.

### **My Days in an Indian Prison (1977) by Mary Tyler**

Being a British citizen, Tyler (1977) enjoyed several privileges during her tenure as a political prisoner and was regarded highly by other inmates. Yet, instead of accepting the fate of solitary confinement and the resulting desperation, she built good relationships with her fellow inmates and participated in hunger strikes on several occasions for the fulfillment of the basic rights of the general prisoners. In ‘My Days in an Indian Prison’ (1977), she described the routine harassments and misbehaviors a woman had to go through in an Indian prison at that period. She states that the prisons are being governed by several unofficial principles and practices that do not even go with the colonial penal laws. Tyler (1977) wrote:

“There was only one copy of the Jail Manual. That could not be spared. The rules said it had to remain in the jail office. No, I could not be permitted to go there and read it. If the jail were run by the rules, I would not like it. Finally, the Jailor came out with it: the Jail Manual did not exist. It was out of print; the jail was run by memory.

Not having access to any written rules, it was impossible to be sure of our rights or to know which of our needs and demands could be legitimately fulfilled. The attitude of most of the jail staff was that everyone in jail must have committed some crime to be there in the first place and it was a favour on the part of the government, as personified by themselves, to provide any food and shelter at all. People wanting to know rules and talking about “rights” were nothing but a damned nuisance.”

At other places, she pointed out the inequalities inherent in the prison system and how a person’s socio-economic background can determine the nature of his/her experiences as a prisoner. She also explained how the system is designed so that prisoners oppress each other to have a comparatively better life in jail.

### ***Bandini (2024) and Bandini (2025) by Dr. Sabrina Hussain Mishti***

*Bandini* is the most recent addition to the prison memoirs written in the Bengali language, and probably the most detailed book available on the living conditions of female prisoners in Bangladesh where Dr. Sabrina Hussain shared her experiences of being incarcerated from 2020 to 2023 in two volumes of her books. She showcased the food quality of prison, reflecting on her memory of taking out half-boiled cockroaches from rice.

Referring to the plight of the economically disadvantaged prisoners, Mishti (2024) wrote how they remained in jail year after year as they could not afford a lawyer. Ruki was one of her fellow inmates who had been in jail for 18 years and even when she sent money (she earned it by working for rich prisoners) to her son for hiring a lawyer who spent it all for himself. The author mentioned the miseries of ex-prisoners once they are released from jail. Many of them end up in the streets or *mazars* as their families refuse to take them in. She writes:

“They get out after serving the sentence for their crimes according to the law. But after that, for which crime is the ‘social sentence’ that they serve bestowed upon them? Who will take the responsibility for their rehabilitation?”

Mishti (2024) described the checking and searching process as utterly disgraceful and humiliating. She mentioned that she didn’t cry at the time of arrest, remand, or at the time of the verdict, but tears always came to her

eyes for fear of being searched. The author pointed out another important fact that around 85 percent of the accused in female prisons are incarcerated for drug-related cases, whereas only 10 percent of the jail population are accused or convicted of murder cases. She wrote that the inmates not only engage in quarrels and use slang against each other, but also get into violent fights. It is worth noting that prison babies have to live through such an unpleasant environment. The harsh experiences of remand are reflected when she wrote about how she had to stay in one saree for 5 days and suffered from skin allergies because of that. The author expressed her relief after coming to the prison from the remand, denoting the fact that then she could finally go to a toilet with closed doors. While being in remand, the accused are forced to go to the toilet in the presence of two female police officers, and they have to keep the toilet door open as well.

She also wrote about the administrative system of prison where old convicted prisoners named '*Pahara*' are given the responsibility to distribute blankets, plates and assign the inmates with their designated tasks, etc. They exploit their power by favoring rich inmates who can shower them with money and gifts whereas the poor prisoners get an uneven workload and unhealthy places for sleeping. Sabrina also discussed Nariprem or the homosexual love of some prisoners and considered it a result of the isolation and sexual deprivation in prisons. At one place, she wrote:

“I can still feel the touch of her fingers on my body. I may have heard about female homosexuality but I have never witnessed it in such a horrific way. That woman has been in prison for many years. When she came to prison, she was only twenty-four years old. She has two children. She is not a real homosexual at all but this mental distortion has arisen from the unsatisfied, strong physical desire she had in prison for sixteen long years. When I understood this, I started feeling intense pain instead of hating her. The environment and circumstances shape people and sometimes these same environments bring destruction.”

In the second part of '*Bandini*', Mishti (2025) mainly discussed the background stories of female prisoners and how they ended up in prison. One important aspect of Kashimpur prison was that there were no supplies of medicines or a designated doctor for people with mental illness. An inmate named Ruku, suffering from an unmentioned mental illness, didn't receive any treatment and was also subjected to torture and abuse by other inmates. It was only after her health deteriorated to a severe degree that she was admitted to the prison hospital and released after 5 days. The lives and miseries of two mentally ill people are also highlighted in the books, which have been mentally unstable long before coming to prison. The author showcased the vile corruption of the administrative system of prisons in Bangladesh. According to her, some

rich inmates fake their illness to stay in the prison hospital for years. By staying there, they can access beds, hot water, better washrooms, mosquito nets, etc.

## **Research methodology**

### **Research Design**

A qualitative research method is employed for this study. As the study aims to analyze the problems faced by female prisoners in Bangladesh, the lived experiences of femaleex-prisoners are vital to identify the specific gaps in the system. At the primary phase of the study, we intensively explored the existing secondary data related to our topic and sorted out the nuances that are to be explored. Since we intended to categorically document the experiences of female prisoners in Bangladesh, we adopted a qualitative approach that would best fit the criteria.

### **Study Area and Sampling**

As the study focuses on comprehensively documenting the lived experiences of female prisoners, we kept both central and district prisons under the scope of the study. Considering constraints on access, we employed a purposive sampling strategy to select our respondents. Accordingly, the study has covered the Central Female's Jail and seven local district and central jails. To make the study more inclusive, primary data were collected from 5 drug dealers, 4 sex workers, 2 non-political activists, 1 household worker, and 13 political prisoners.

### **Data Collection**

This study employed Key Informant Interviews (KII) to gather in-depth knowledge about the lived experiences of female prisoners. After 25 KIIs, the responses tended to become repetitive and devoid of new insights or interesting observations, indicating that data saturation has been achieved. Therefore, the first 25 KIIs were finalized for the study. As mentioned earlier, the respondents were from varying backgrounds and went to prison for varying reasons. A semi-structured questionnaire was prepared, as it gave participants more room to provide their analysis and insights according to their choice. The questionnaire was designed to address key themes like accommodation, food, health, sanitation, mental health, etc. With the consent of the participants, the offline and online interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed into text using Microsoft Word. The interviews were reviewed multiple times so as not to miss any important information. Typed notes were taken so that the key information could be revisited and used for data analysis. Each interview

lasted 30-90 minutes. Before collecting data, consents were taken from the respondents and they were not forced to answer any question.

### **Expert interviews**

A total of 6 expert interviews were conducted to gather critical insights on various aspects of female imprisonment in Bangladesh. Our experts include two lawyers, one criminology professor, two anthropology professors and one human rights activist. They provided legal insights, historical instances of human rights abuses, and the complex implications the prison system can have on women. They also provided policy suggestions regarding the improvement of the living conditions of female prisoners and alternatives to female imprisonment:

### **Data Analysis Method**

This study adopted a Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) method to analyse primary data. We employed a combination of inductive and deductive approaches to generate our themes. That means we identified and explained several themes based on our literature review and initial understanding of the topic (deductive approach). However, during the data analysis, we identified several new themes from the data gathered for our research. We reread and reviewed the transcripts of the interviews multiple times to familiarize ourselves with the data and to generate initial codes. We looked over the codes to identify recurring themes and patterns in our data. We reviewed and compared our themes to remain faithful to our data and to ensure that nothing goes missing in the final report of the study.

We also applied a combination of semantic and latent approaches to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the data. The semantic approach helped us analyze and categorize the explicit content of the data. However, we occasionally applied a latent approach to examine and interpret the underlying ideas and assumptions of our respondents.

### **Ethical considerations**

Voluntary and informed consent was obtained from all participants before conducting the interviews. The participants agreed to being recorded for the study, since it was assured that their anonymity would be maintained in the study report. Details regarding the design and purpose of the research were explained prior to the interview stage. Interview arrangements were organized directly with participants and rescheduled when necessary. All interviews were conducted either at an agreed location or online according to the preference of the respondents. The interview transcripts were stored away from public access, and only the assigned researchers had access to the data. A concise effort on the part of the researcher ensured that there was no

attempt to deceive the participants in any way. No participant was forced to reply to a question if they felt uncomfortable.

## Findings

Since our respondents shared their prison experiences in exclusive detail, we thought it better to present their views and insights theme by theme so that it becomes easier for the general readers to gather specific and significant knowledge about the different aspects of a woman's prison life. To ensure the originality and compactness of the insights, long statements from the interviews have been cited on multiple occasions.

### Checking in the Prison: A Violation of Human Dignity

Before entering prison, a woman must undergo 'a comprehensive checking'. As such, checking becomes a sort of *welcome* from the world that is awaiting her. She also gets a glimpse of the overall treatment she is going to *enjoy* in her prison life. Unfortunately, the glimpse does nothing but terrify most women at the very beginning of a new experience. During the interviews, all our respondents described checking as a variation of sexual harassment and a violation of human dignity. While most of them just commented on the overall process. Res-13 shared some details with us:

“The checking process in prison is horrible. First, they give you some time to rest. Then they check you. They have curtains drawn. During checking, a woman has nothing on her body except her body hair. Those who wear Kamij have to take off their Kamij. Those who wear burqas have to take off their burqas. All underwear is taken off. They check inside their mouths. They check inside their hair. Lastly, women have to sit up and down, so that if there is a mobile phone or something inside the uterus, it comes out.”

While checking applies to all women by law, there are some exceptions in reality. As Res-13 told us, many people are not checked unless instructed by higher authorities. Most of them are VIPs (politicians, CIPs, celebrities, rich ladies, etc.). Res-4, a university student, said that her checking happened in the presence of two female officers. There was no privacy, and the checking process was very weird. Res-14, a sex worker, said that officials touched her genitals during checking. Res-16, a sex worker who spent 10 days in Kashimpur prison in December 2024, told us that they undergo the same checking process when they enter court. She described checking as extremely embarrassing and contradictory to human dignity since during the checking (in court), she was made naked. There was little privacy, and males could

have entered at any time. On the overall checking process, she commented:

“I might be a criminal, but they don’t have any right to see or touch my genitals. Why should I have to be naked in front of their eyes? Advanced technology should be introduced in the process.”

What’s more regrettable is that the process remained the same over the decades. The aggressive and embarrassing checking process is probably one of the trademark practices of the penal apparatus of Bangladesh. Res-6, a veteran leftist politician, shared with us her shocking checking experiences during her first tenure in prison in 1991. She was in her period when she was sent to the old central jail at Nazimuddin Road, Dhaka. In spite of her repeated requests, she was forced to undress. When the matron saw period blood, she did not even bother to provide Res-6 with any underwear, hence making the experience even more insulting and embarrassing. Times have passed since then, and at present, Bangladesh has a specialized prison facility for women. However, gender-sensitive treatment of female prisoners is still absent in our country.

### **Accommodation: The Nightmare of ‘Ilish-file’**

Our respondents have recounted their horrific accommodation experiences in prisons. Being overcrowded and insufficiently spacious, the prison wards often give nightmarish experiences to the prisoners who cannot sleep well or keep their belongings in the small space they are allowed in prisons. Those who live in cells, mostly criminal convicts, enjoy a little more space than the rest of the prisoners. Surprisingly, many ward-living prisoners are eager to shift to cells, although there are more restrictions on the movement of cell-living prisoners. Interestingly, according to Res-20, nobody knows exactly how many prisoners are supposed to live in a ward. For instance, if there are 30 prisoners in a ward in the running month, two months later, one will see 60 prisoners living in the same room, and the administration does not care whether the prisoners are facing any problems regarding their accommodation. Res-20 sadly remembers the ward where she used to live during her time in Kashimpur. The ward had large windows, and there was no shortage of light and air inside.

However, it always felt damp and stuffy because there were too many people in the ward living in little space. The situation is worse in district jails, where the female wards are often very small. Res-10, who spent seven days in Barisal Central Jail, told us that the female ward of the jail was like a small cage, without enough space to have a walk or visit other parts of the prison. During her time in jail, 57 women were living in the female ward, while the ward can accommodate 20-25 prisoners at best. The scenario is the same for the district jails of Rajbari, Rangamati, and Satkhira. However, even more

dire is the situation in Narsingdi District Jail. According to Res-18 and Res-19, the prison used to flood during the monsoon and often, the water inside the prison would rise to the level of the kneesthat a woman would need to cross the water to go to the ward to collect her food, and then return to the cell. There were leeches in that water, and the water was so dirty that prisoners had to clean the yard after the water got down.

Our respondents expressed their dissatisfaction regarding the culture of keeping undertrial prisoners with criminal convicts in female wards despite the legal prohibition. In fact, this is one of the reasons why most respondents faced serious difficulties regarding accommodation when they first entered prisons. They did not know that the allocation of seats or beds is controlled by *Paharas*, or the senior criminal convicts of the prisons. The *Paharas* sell seats and demand a certain amount of money depending on the capacity of the newcomer (even the seats in hospitals can be purchased, although at a high price). Until and unless the newcomer pays for her seat, she has to undergo a lot of harassment. As Res-7 and Res-20 describe, the *Paharas* can force her to sleep in front of the bathroom, or next to the door, or in the middle of the ward if she does not pay for the seat. Res-12, who spent one and a half years in Kashimpur, described the situation perfectly: “there were about 40 people in the ward. One cubit and four fingers of space for each prisoner.” Within that space, they had to sleep and keep their belongings. They were given three blankets each: one for using as a pillow, one for the bed, and one to cover herself. There were 28/30 beds (here, bed means seat) for 40 people. As a result, many had to live in the middle. The lives of those who lived in the middle were very nomadic. They had no fixed place to keep their food or clothes, because they had no bed. Res-5 and Res-20 described how they used sleep at night in the infamous ‘Ilish-file (Hilsa-file) system’ where one person’s head is placed next to another person’s feet, and a person cannot even move around while sleeping. Being taller than others, Res-7 had to tolerate the scolding of other prisoners, since her legs would touch their bodies once she tried to sleep relaxedly. Insulted and exhausted, she decided not to sleep at all at night. Res-12 said that her spine became stiff as she slept on the floor for a long time. What’s more, the lights were kept on for the whole night, and many prisoners faced difficulty because of that while sleeping. There was also no mosquito net in the prisons.

Being overcrowded, female wards are often very noisy and it becomes impossible for a woman to read a book or rest peacefully, even during the day. Res-13 told us that she felt better in the cell (she was sent to a cell as part of a punishment), as she was able to read books peacefully there. However, since the movements of the cell-living prisoners are restricted and they can’t visit the playground like others, they often experience an increase in their weight after spending several months in a cell. Those who lived in

wards mostly described the open ground as their favorite place in jail. Some respondents told us that they used to feel extremely sad during the evening lock-up. The pain of being incarcerated in a noisy ward and not being able to spend a simple, serene, and peaceful evening appeared to them a harsh punishment in itself. Res-4, who spent a few weeks in Kashimpur, told us that even after her release, she could not stay inside her house after 5 pm, as it would make her feel as though she was still in jail. Those evenings in the confines of a noisy and overcrowded female ward became a trauma for her. Res-8, who spent four months in Rajbari District Jail, compared the morning release and evening lock-up with the chickens leaving their coops in the morning and returning there at evening.

### **Food and Water: An Anatomy of the Infamous *Jeler Bhaat***

All respondents described the regular diet that is provided in prisons as nutritionally and quantitatively inadequate. Most prisoners faced difficulty eating the food that was given to them. Res-2 told us that she spent 47 days in Kashimpur prison, but did not eat the regular diet for a single day. Although very little in content (meat in the size of dices), the central women's jail in Kashimpur does provide protein-based food on a daily basis. The condition, however, is much dire in district jails. Women who have been in the district jails reported getting protein in their diet once or twice a week. A lot of respondents recalled a bad smell in the water, saying that the drinking water was unhygienic. Res-12 mentioned that she always had to drink mineral water that she bought from the canteen. She gave a detailed account of how food was in Kashimpur prison:

“The quality of food is the worst. Dinner is served between 3 to 4 pm. Since rice is cheap, sometimes rice gets spoiled before evening on hot days. The vegetables are rotten. They cannot be given to the mouth. We are given very small pieces of fish. Tilapia, silver carp, and pangasius –only these three fish are given to us. Fish is served twice a week. Chicken twice and Beef once a week (beef is known as ‘diet’ in jails). Breakfast is red roti, khichuri, and semolina halwa on Fridays. The roti is full of sand. It is not even edible”.

A few respondents told us that a large amount of rice is wasted in Kashimpur prison daily, since many prisoners cannot eat the rice due to the bad quality of other food items. However, once they manage to adjust, as one respondent pointed out jokingly, many prisoners fall in love with that rice, famously known as ‘jeler vat’. In festivals like Pahela Baishakh or Eid, all prisoners get traditional Bengali festival dishes like polao, roast, etc. However,

respondents of both central and district jails claimed that women given the responsibility of writer and *Pahara* steal food from others, and the general prisoners do not get their deserved share because of this. Even the claim of a little better quality of food in Kashimpur Central Jail is brought to light in the words of Res-22, “We found cockroaches in lentil curry. There were cooked vegetables and greens that were not peeled properly, and the dirt was not removed. That’s how the cooking gets done in prisons.” She also mentioned that the condition remained the same after the mass uprising of 2024.

Two of the respondents felt that some kind of medicine was mixed in their food. This is a common perception of prisoners in Bangladesh. Because of the lack of quality food in their regular diet, the prisoners often resort to buying food using their PC Card from the canteen at a much higher price. Res-19 stated that the price of a single piece of pangasius fish and tilapia fish used to cost 120 TK and 150 TK respectively. She observed, ‘jail is no place for lower-middle-class people’. Both Res-11 and Res-12, who have been in separate prisons (Barishal Central Prison and Kashimpur Central Prison) mentioned that when the DIG or IG Prison came to visit, the food quality improved drastically and changed again when they left. An interesting observation by a respondent was:

“There is one thing I like about prisons. The elderly people there have no way of dying of hunger. When they stand beside the canteen, someone always buys them food. I think that the abandoned old people in our society who are not looked after by their children can be left in prisons.”

## **Health, Sanitation and Menstrual Health: The Denial of Feminine Needs**

The prison authorities of Bangladesh are not attentive to the menstrual health of female prisoners. They do not provide sanitary pads to women prisoners. “It is denied that women have periods inside prisons”, said Res-12. Consequently, they have to buy pads from the stores inside the jail or give money to prison guards to get pads from outside. According to the respondents, a packet of sanitary pads that costs 160 TK outside would cost 300-500 TK in prisons. If the inmates do not have money, they have no way to access this product. Res-4 said that she had to wear a single pad for four days after coming to the prison. In district jails, the condition is much harsher. A respondent of Khagrachari District Jail said that the prison guards refused to give those pads, saying there are no such rules. A few respondents said that many prisoners had to use unhygienic clothes during their period, as they don’t know how to use sanitary napkins. The prison authority takes no

steps to raise awareness among them regarding the issue. Almost all of the respondents said that the bathing houses are very open and uncomfortable, as there is no privacy. The privacy needs of female prisoners are thus neglected. As stated by Res-3, the female bathing house of Rangamati district jail can be seen from the male ward, which made her very uneasy. Most respondents from Kashimpur Central Prison mentioned that they got skin allergies from bathing in the jail water. However, affluent prisoners can avoid jail water if they can afford it. A few respondents have reported that a rich and influential political leader used to bathe in MUM water occasionally.

According to Res-12, only small lifebuoy soap and a bottle of coconut oil are provided once a month by the prison authority, both of which run out soon. Majority said that no hand soaps usually provided in ward toilets. Dampened floor and unavailability of water (a single toilet that is often used by 70-100 inmates) were common concerns. The participants also mentioned that to go to the washroom that is outside the ward, they had to pull water from the tubewell first and carry it there. Res-4 avoided going to the washroom because of all these troubles (went twice in 5 days). Medicines that are mostly available in prisons are Histacine and Napa. Res-6 mentioned that she was not given an inhaler despite being an asthma patient. In the aftermath of a serious asthma attack, she was taken to a different department of a local hospital that is not related to the pulmonology department. Res-13 from Kashimpur prison said, ‘patients are only taken to the hospital when they reach a very critical condition. There are instances of female prisoners dying while being on the way to the hospital and never receiving proper treatment at all. Female prisoners cannot take care of their beauty in prison. A cheap cream called ‘Lata Harbal’ is very popular in the prisons, and poor prisoners use the cream to whiten their skin. However, the overall environment is not beauty-friendly, and most prisoners lose their natural glow after living in prisons for a significant period of time. Respondent-18 rightly said, “A woman does not ever get the years she spends in jail back in her life, and with it goes her beauty. We become like Rohingya or Palestinian refugees.”

### **Nariprem or Lesbianism: The Complex Sexuality of Female Prisoners**

Most of our respondents have acknowledged the presence of homosexual love among many female prisoners. In Kashimpur jail, lesbianism is popularly known as ‘Nariprem (love between women)’. Our respondents described it as an open secret and a long-standing practice in female prisons. Res-13, who was kept in a cell (for 6 months) as a punishment for her alleged lesbian behavior, described lesbianism as an age-old taboo that is known to all, but acknowledged by none. She also told us that one of the key reasons for keeping lights on at night is to ensure that nobody indulges in homosexuality.

Res-2 and Res-7 regarded lesbianism as a consequence of long-term isolation and sexual deprivation caused by imprisonment. Res-16 told us that these romantic relationships among female prisoners are based on mutual consent, and no prisoner does anything against the will of another prisoner. Inmate-on-inmate sexual victimization is probably rare in female prisons. However, Res-16 added, “many girls fall into the trap of homosexuality due to the greed for good food and comfort. After eye contact and kissing, girls slowly become aroused.”

Prison authorities often consider lesbianism a punishable offence. Sabrina (2024) mentioned several instances in her book where prisoners were punished for their involvement in homosexual activities. Punishments include sending to a cell for solitary confinement, handcuffing, etc. However, in many cases, prison wardens allow homosexual relationships. Res-19, who spent more than 6 years in Narsingdi District Jail and saw ‘horrific homosexuality’ there, told us that wardens allow homosexual relationships in return for money. Occasionally, envy among prisoners regarding their lesbian partner leads to unexpected trials and punishments. As Res-16 described, “there are *extramarital affairs* among homosexuals as well. If caught, they are made to stand in handcuffs.” In rare cases, imprisonment helps a woman discover homosexual tendencies in herself. It can even help her to find her lifelong homosexual partner. For example, Res-21 and Res-22, two drug peddlers who live in a slum in the Mirpur area, are homosexual partners who *learnt homosexuality* during their time in jail. They have been together for 12 years and the slum has accepted their relationship. They call each other ‘bon (sister)’ instead of wife, so that society does not criticize. Respondent-22 proudly remarks, “I bail out my sister (Res-21), when she is caught. No one cares about us because we earn our own money. No one cares what we do.”

### **Mental Health: An Underexplored Domain of Prison Life**

Many participants mentioned the presence of completely mentally ill prisoners in the jail, saying that they were kept with the general prisoners. Prison authorities care little about the mental health of the prisoners. Mentally ill prisoners are not provided with any consultation or treatment. Many women become mentally disturbed after entering jail. The common female prisoners mainly undergo mental pressure because of study gaps, kids at home, bail money, ongoing cases, prison hierarchy, societal backlashes, etc. Res-4 felt that the jail politics was mental torture for her, as a social connection is needed to access very basic things. Res-8, on the other hand, stated that she felt devastated as she couldn’t meet her young children for a long time.

Another participant expressed having decreased concentration power and memory after returning from jail. Res-16 said that according to present rules, prisoners can only meet their family members once every 15 days and

further added that if they could meet them twice a week, the female prisoners would have a much better mental health status. She also mentioned that one convicted prisoner told the story of her daughter getting raped by her father after she came to prison, and hearing this story, she felt worried for the safety of her own daughter.

Some women feel suicidal after coming to prison at first. According to respondent Res-19; one inmate tried committing suicide by setting herself on fire inside of Narsingdi District Jail. Another respondent said that jail experience is comparatively more traumatic for women than men because women cannot share their stories of prison hardship with others for fear of social stigma. Two respondents of this study who were arrested under the Anti-terrorism Act, 2009 were completely isolated from the others and they felt detached from the outside world. They also described how the authorities used to generate fear and suspicion in the minds of common prisoners so that they would not mix with *Jangis* or terrorists. Res-10, who has been in Barisal Central Prison, stated, “The current prison system is not feasible for reforming someone. There are no counseling services and no creative activities. People are treated like animals.”

### **Recreation and Entertainment: The Monopoly of BTV Channel**

Entertainment facilities are currently insufficient in female prisons. Prisoners usually read books and newspapers and watch TV for entertainment. Unfortunately, no channel except BTV (the government television channel) is permitted in jails. Our respondents told us that they had little interest in watching TV, because BTV was not entertaining for them. Res-12 told us that there is a TV in every ward of Kashimpur prison; however, the TVs break down frequently, and the prisoners can't use them as an everyday source of entertainment. As an alternative, they go to the open ground of the prison and gossip with each other. Gossiping is probably the easiest and most encouraging, and soothing experience one can have in a jail, because that does not require any rules and protocols. The libraries of the jails are small in size, and their collection of books is often poor. The shelves of the libraries are usually full of old, damaged religious books that do not attract most educated prisoners. Occasionally, affluent prisoners enrich the library by donating new books. Res-12 mentions an influential Awami politician, who donated 15/20 books to the Kashimpur prison. However, the lack of official care and the difficult protocols prevent the libraries from providing genuine and constructive entertainment to the prisoners. Res-20 said that the library protocols should be brief and smooth; otherwise most prisoners (particularly undertrial ones) will not be able to utilize the library. Another notable fact is, the noise inside the wards often makes it impossible for a woman to read a book on her own. A spacious library with necessary arrangements can ensure a better reading experience for the prisoners.

Regarding newspapers, our respondents gave us some interesting information. Interestingly; Res-12 told us that they used to get censored newspapers in Kashimpur prison. “Newspapers are provided”, she said, “but they cut out prison-related or political news. No other newspapers are provided except Jugantar, Samakal and the Daily Star. Prothom Alo is generally not provided.” The practice of censoring newspapers reminds us of the colonial era, when the authorities were anxious about the political consciousness of the Indian people and used to send them to the Andaman Cellular jails so that they remain in complete isolation from the outer world. While this statement is broadly applicable to all prisons, it is worth noting that district prisons lag significantly behind central prisons in providing entertainment facilities to prisoners. Res-9, who went to Khagrachari District Prison twice, told us that there was no TV or library in the jail. Res-19 told us that the condition of the library of Narsingdi District Jail was very deplorable, while Narayanganj District Jail had comparatively better library facilities. When existing entertainment facilities cannot satisfy a prisoner, she often finds other ways to spend her time meaningfully. Res-8, a BNP politician, spent four months with sex workers in the same ward in Rajbari District Jail. During this time, she explored the lives of the sex workers and taught them to read and write in Bengali and English, and to recite the Quran. While these activities are not entertaining in the traditional sense of the word, prisoners certainly enjoy doing these things more than watching BTV or reading old books from the prison library.

### **Prison Management, Staff-Prisoner Relationship and Internal Corruption**

There are actually two parallel management structures in prisons: formal structure and semi-formal (informal structure). Formal structure comprises the official hierarchy beginning from the Jail Super and ending with the prison guards or wardens working inside the prisons. Among this long chain of correctional staff, the Jail Super is considered the most powerful person in a particular prison. However, in terms of involvement in day-to-day administration, the Jailor is the most informed and influential official, as he possesses effective decision-making power over subordinate officials. Prison guards (wardens and matrons) are the lowest-ranking officials responsible for maintaining discipline and monitoring prisoners’ behavior, overseeing prison labor, preventing escapes, violence, and contraband, etc. Due to the nature of their activities, they are the ones who directly interact with prisoners and can significantly contribute to the well-being or the misery of a prisoner.

The respondents of this study provided mixed opinions regarding the role of prison guards in prisons. While many identified them as underpaid, opportunistic, and corrupt individuals, others also focused on the positive

aspects of their character and identified them as ‘victims of the system’. Res-24 and Res-25, two drug peddlers, told us that while inserting money into their PC Cards, prison guards used to keep a certain amount of money for themselves. Res-25 remembered about her being further discriminated, as she says, “I brought 3000Tk through a female guard. For that, I had to pay her 500 Tk, whereas others usually pay 200/300 Tk.” Res-18 experienced similar practices in the Narsingdi District Prison, where “female guards used to appropriate half of the money from prisoners’ PC Cards.” However, Res-19 stated in another place that not all guards are bad; there are sympathetic ones, too. Res-16, a sex worker, positively commented, “prison guards are very sympathetic; they help the prisoners communicate with their families; they help in making PC Cards. They cooperate in various ways until a prisoner manages a lawyer.” Res-8 also sympathetically commented, “prison guards working inside prisons also live a kind of imprisoned life. They know little about the outer world.” A few respondents told us that the guards’ approach varies depending on the socio-economic background of a prisoner. However, as Res-13 claimed, when guards do anything wrong or inhumane, they are also tried by the authority.

However, it is not possible to explain the prison dynamics without shedding light on the complex interplay between convicted prisoners (*Kayedi*) and under trial prisoners (*Hazati*). Whether a woman’s life in prison will be good or bad mostly depends on her relationship with senior, convicted prisoners. Res-13, who spent three years in Kashimpur prison, remarked that it is the *Kayedi* who actually administer the prisons. They manage and control 80% of the issues in the daily lives of the prisoners. An informal hierarchy has developed among the convicted prisoners, with the consent of the formal administration, which governs almost everything in a prisoner’s life, from having living spaces to access to resources. Along with official rules, there are unofficial rules and protocols that are to be mandatorily obeyed by the majority of prisoners. When a woman enters jail for the first time, she has little or no idea about this aspect of prison life. That is why it becomes difficult for her to acclimatize herself to the prison atmosphere, even if she comes from an educated, affluent background.

The most influential person in this informal hierarchy is the Mate. A mate is usually a prisoner sentenced to life Imprisonment who has built a good and workable relationship with the prison authority through obedience and good conduct. The chief responsibility of a mate is to oversee a certain number of convicted prisoners (often living in cells) and govern their day-to-day activities. After Mate comes *Pahara*. A *Pahara* is also a sentenced prisoner who oversees the activities of undertrial and convicted prisoners living together in the female wards. The prison is actually run by mates and *Paharas* who often come from criminal backgrounds and need correction

themselves. The formal authority entrusts them with so many responsibilities that, at first glance, it might seem like the authority has actually outsourced its own responsibilities. As we have mentioned earlier, the colonial practice of governing prisoners through prisoners has gained acceptance of prison administrators due largely to its economy and efficiency. The authority gives them power, because it does not give them money. *Mates* and *Paharas* are actually underpaid, semi-formal prison staff who provide services to the authority at the cheapest possible rate. However, to compensate themselves, they exploit fellow prisoners. Respondents of this study thoroughly described how the *mates* and *Paharas* have established an illegal business of selling services to the prisoners. They are also the key perpetrators of the intramural corruption that embitters the life of a common prisoner.

Corruption is an omnipresent phenomenon in the prisons of Bangladesh. As the *Kayedis* are closely engaged in the whole process of the preparation and distribution of a service, they form a syndicate in collaboration with the formal administration, which controls all aspects of a prisoner's life. Res-13 told us that the *Kayedis* themselves bring cooking rice from the prison storehouse. As she says, "they prepare food for 2,000 inmates at once. After they finish preparing, they steal a large amount of cooked food and keep it aside to sell it later at a high price. Because of their corruption, most prisoners do not get the amount of food they are supposed to get." According to Res-13, the *Kayedis* are also part of the syndicate that is responsible for the high price of products available at the Canteen, which is the largest area of corruption in the jail. As described by her, whether the prices will be high or low depends on the Jail Super. However, the Jailor is significantly involved in internal corruption. He is the partner of the *Kayedis*. Together, they commit corruption and run the canteen. Res-12 also claimed similar things. According to her observation, the canteen money usually goes into the jailor's pocket. When the IG comes to visit the prison, he would take away paan, mosquito coils, jorda, etc. from the canteen. He would also take away the food price chart because the price written on the chart is higher than the standard price of those products. Res-24, a poor drug peddler says, "the price of peppers and onions inside the prison is very high. The price of biscuits that cost 50/60 Tk outside, would cost 150 Tk inside the prison. The price of soap is also high. A 20-taka water bottle would cost 50 Tk in jail."

Because of corruption, money becomes the sole determinant of a prisoners' well-being and fulfillment of their needs. As Res-8 pointed out, "you can even buy tiger's eyes in jail, if you have money." Those who are rich manage to live a more or less comfortable life in jail and poor people have to work for the rich to get some money or facilities. Many poor prisoners are surviving in prisons year after year by serving affluent prisoners. They

wholeheartedly obey their boss. Many respondents of this study mentioned a certain lady, an influential political leader of the Awami League, who used to arrange weekly feasts in Kashimpur prison, and was very popular among poor prisoners. She had a gang of herself and used to maintain an intimate relationship with the prison authority. She also allegedly used to run a beauty parlor in jail. However, the main victims of the corruption are under-trial prisoners (*Hazati*). When a new prisoner arrives, the *Paharas* observe her financial capacity and treat her accordingly. As a result, although a woman initially faces bullying and misbehaviors, she can soon become a favorite of the *Paharas* if she has considerable financial backing. Res-12 pictured it perfectly, “the *Paharas* provide numerous services in exchange for money. They will provide good food and accommodation.” Therefore, the *Paharas* treat the rich prisoners as their masters. In a similar tone, Res-26 stated, “as long as you are feeding them with money, you will have a good relationship with them. This is the main principle of the *Kayedi-Hazati* relationship.” Res-15 had to pay 1500 Tk to sleep in a good bed for seven days. All political prisoners among our respondents told us that they were eligible to receive division facilities, yet they were not given division. Many of them paid the *Paharas* for a good seat. Corruption is also present in the release procedure. Along with rich prisoners, drug dealers are supposed to pay the authorities for early release from jail. Res-12 explained it perfectly:

“Drug dealers know well when they will go to jail and when they will get out of jail. Bail is obtained by paying money. It does not last more than 15/20 days. The more money one has, the faster one can get out of a drug case. It works this way: less custody, more money or more custody, less money. The longest jail time is spent in heroin cases. I know about a drug dealer who was in jail for two and a half years. She got out by bribing the authorities 50-60 lacTk.”

However, this statement does not apply to the poor drug peddlers who constitute a large part of the prison population. Instead of getting an early bail, many drug peddlers spent month after month in jails without committing any serious crime, or just because their names are on the criminal list of the police. These women, victims of arbitrary arrest, torture, and imprisonment, can be rehabilitated by government initiatives, yet they rot in jail. In some cases, they build good relationships with prison guards and allegedly supply drugs inside the prison. Several of our respondents reported that they saw many women taking soft drugs (*gul*, *jarda-biri*, cigarettes, etc.) in jail, which is supposed to be banned by the law. They linked the drug business with the corrupt behavior of prison guards as well as top administrators. Most of our respondents were skeptical about the chances of curbing corruption. Because of the presence of multiple stakeholders in the corrupt system, they think it would be very difficult to build a corruption-free prison system.

Res-13 observed that no matter how much reform is brought in the formal administration, the internal corruption will not decrease, since it is the *Kayedis* who are the most corrupted. Unless the *kayedi*-based prison management is replaced with a new and healthy system, it will be foolish to expect any improvement in the corruption scenario. However, Res-13 acknowledged the role of the Jail Super in temporarily curbing prison corruption. Her observation is that if the Jail Super is ambitious and sincere about bringing changes, then he can be successful. Res-12 also agreed on this. She says, “Jail Super Mr. Obaidul did not pay any attention to the food of the prisoners. Mr. Obaidul was transferred because of a scandal, and a new Jail Super, Mr. Shah Jahan, replaced him. Mr. Shah Jahan was strict about the quality and quantity of the food and prevented the illegal business. As a result, significant changes came in the quality of foods under his administration.” However, this is only one instance of success. The question of curbing prison corruption is closely linked with the larger questions of prison economy and the complex human resource management in prisons. The current system allows corruption, only because it will collapse if *Kayedis* stop working on its behalf.

### **Prison Labor: A Burden Unless You Are Rich**

Prison labor is often described as a part of the correctional process imposed upon convicts sentenced to rigorous imprisonment. However, the reality is completely different in Bangladeshi prisons. In the current system, under-trial prisoners are forced to do many laborious tasks that are tough to be accomplished by an ordinary woman. The tasks include digging, fetching water, mowing the grass, carrying food for fellow prisoners, cleaning the washroom, mopping the floor, cleaning the yard, etc. Financially solvent prisoners often recruit poor prisoners to work on their behalf. Many of our respondents managed to avoid prison labor in this way. As Res-12 remembered, “there is no law for *Hazati* work. Yet, they were forced to work. Those who didn’t want to work had to pay money for it. The money was taken from and distributed among those who worked on their behalf.” However, those who did not have money were forced by *Kayedis* to give their labor. Res-12 and Res-24 remembered carrying a large dish full of hot rice to the fourth floor once per month. This task appeared to be most difficult for them, yet they couldn’t escape it.

Prison authorities are well aware of the illegitimate prison labor; however, they allow it to go on from economic considerations. They have other justifications as well. As Res-13 reported:

“The *Hazati* (under trial prisoners) are not legally bound to work. Yet they are ordered and forced to work because many lose their mental balance while sitting idle. However, the Jail Super does not

give this order for fear of losing his job. The Jailor gives this order. If the *Hazati* do not work, the Jailor and the *Kayedi* look down on them.”

Res-24 described how the authority suppresses the reality from the public’s eyes. She stated, “when a journalist or guest visits the prisons, under-trial prisoners are locked up in their wards so that they can expose anything to the visitor. Still, if somebody manages somehow to tell the truth, she is handcuffed and punished.” Apart from the unofficial labor, some informal or semi-official tasks are handed over to the prisoners. One such popular semi-official post is ‘the writer’. Most often, educated prisoners who can read and write are recruited as writers to keep everyday prison records. They also help the prison authority by giving prisoner-level services. Res-12, who worked as a ‘medical writer’ stated:

“As medical writers, we used to provide first aid and other services to the prisoners. There are case table writers who work with the officers. Their job is to call people over the mic when someone comes to meet. They also go to jail gates to do the tasks they are assigned. Room writers supervise every prisoner in the wards. They make sure everyone comes on time and keep everyone’s details.”

There are other officially assigned tasks like quilting. The jail authority receives orders from many companies to prepare Kantha or NakshiKantha for them. In this way, the authority utilizes the cheap labor of the prisoners. According to our respondents, the prison authority usually gives a woman 200/300/400 Tk for each Kantha shemakes. Those who quilt usually do not have to participate in other jobs. However, as they are severely underpaid, they have to look for other jobs to earn money.

### **Prison Babies and Pregnant Mothers: The Innocent Victims of Legal System**

Although Kashimpur Central Prison had a separate ward with day-care facilities, and dedicated meals for pregnant women and children, it was apparent from the interviews that they didn’t receive adequate pre and antenatal care and medical treatment. Children get better meals (eggs, milk, bigger pieces of fish, meat) in Kashimpur Central Prison than the general prisoners, according to Res-22. However, Res-4 said that she didn’t see pregnant women receiving separate checkups and sufficient medical attention. Res-5 stated that the children living inside prison do not remain normal because of the prison environment. Some of the interviewees mentioned that they have seen general prisoners remaining in the ward dedicated to pregnant women and children. Most respondents opined that although there are some separate facilities for babies, these are not sufficient to ensure their normal physical

and mental growth. Moreover, although the current law allows children up to six years old to stay with their mothers in jail, a few respondents claimed to see much older children staying in Kashimpur jail.

On the other hand, district prisons do not have separate wards or facilities for pregnant women and children. Res-8, who has been in the Rajbari District Jail, said that the only separate meal that children receive is a little powdered milk. Res-10 said that, being a doctor herself, she used to check and treat pregnant women in Barisal Central Prison. It is to be noted that several prisoners of both central and district prisons reported witnessing pregnant women (who have been through surgery) being brought to the prison as soon as the surgery is completed. Their health condition wasn't considered at that time, and they were made to walk a long distance to the prison in that condition. Another respondent reported seeing an expectant mother being beaten with a thick ruler just because she plucked a fruit from a tree.

## **Discussion**

### **Summary of the Findings**

This study documented the living experiences of 25 female ex-prisoners in exclusive detail. It is now not difficult to identify the key aspects of their living conditions that need immediate and long-term reform. Below, we are briefly presenting the most important findings based on the KIIIs portrayed above:

1. The checking process in the prisons is utterly humiliating for a woman and a violation of human dignity. Our respondents demanded the introduction of modern technologies in the process.
2. Accommodation facilities in the prisons are insufficient. Most prisoners cannot even sleep properly in the space they are given. Financially insolvent prisoners suffer more since they cannot purchase extra facilities from senior prisoners. Undertrial and convicted prisoners live together in the wards.
3. Regular meals provided by the prisons are quantitatively and nutritionally insufficient. Not enough protein is provided. Prisoners have to depend on the prison canteen to access better food. The situation is dire in district prisons, where women prisoners do not enjoy any specialized facilities. Moreover, the corrupt environment and the high prices of food products in the jails make it difficult for the financially incapable to access better food in the canteen.

4. The menstrual health of the female prisoners is a neglected issue in prisons. The authorities do not provide sanitary napkins to the prisoners.
5. The privacy needs of female prisoners are also neglected. The bathing facilities do not allow any private space for women.
6. The overall health and sanitation scenario is horrifying. Medical services provided to the prisoners are insufficient. Doctors are not readily available. The situation is worse in district jails.
7. The authorities also care little for maintaining hygienic standards. The washrooms are dirty and stinky.
8. Female prisoners, including under-trial women, are exposed to illegitimate prison labor. Prisoners have to do laborious tasks that are not suitable for females.
9. The day-to-day prison administration is actually run by an informal hierarchy comprising senior convicted prisoners. These prisoners are severely corrupt and play a key role in increasing the suffering of common prisoners.
10. Prisons in Bangladesh are severely corrupt. Both the formal and informal administration of the prisons are responsible for corruption. The canteen is the most corrupt area in a jail.
11. The entertainment facilities in the prisons are extremely insufficient. District prisons lag far behind in this respect. No channel except BTV is allowed in prisons and Library services are too complex and old-fashioned to be used.
12. Sexual deprivation leads many female inmates to build consent-based, lesbian relationships with fellow inmates.
13. No prison, except Kashimpur Female Central Prison, has separate wards of pregnant mothers and babies. Facilities available for dependent babies and their mothers are extremely insufficient.
14. Prison authorities care little about the mental health of the prisoners. Mentally ill prisoners are not provided with any consultation or treatment.
15. Prisoners coming from financially insolvent backgrounds are more exposed to the structural inequalities of the current prison system. Most of them lack proper legal representation.
16. Financially insolvent prisoners undergo social stigmatization due to their imprisonment. While political prisoners often manage to evade social stigma, many poor criminal prisoners tend to be isolated from their families and relatives after they enter jail.

## **Critical Analysis of Female Imprisonment and Viable Alternatives**

Combining the experiences of female ex-prisoners facilitates glimpses of the overall horrific atmosphere that women prisoners are going through. Several aspects of the current system need immediate attention. First of all, the prison authorities are not fulfilling the basic needs of the prisoners. Secondly, there are large numbers of convicted and under-trial female prisoners who cannot access proper legal aid. Thirdly, while the prisons are perfectly serving the purpose of punishing ‘criminals’, there is nothing in the current prison management that is committed to the correction and rehabilitation of those who come into prisons. It is high time we brought holistic policy reforms to the prison system. Successive governments have neglected the prison question because of the invisibility of the problems of prisons. The civil society of Bangladesh is also not aware of the issue. Therefore, coordinated efforts are required to popularize the prison question and bring effective reforms in the overall criminal justice system of Bangladesh. For this study, we spoke with five experts to know what needs to be done to ensure the well-being of women living in female prisons in Bangladesh. This section presents their analysis of the problem and the recommendations given by them to solve the problem.

Nasrin Siraj, a researcher and a former teacher at BRAC University, problematized the process of defining crimes and criminals in Bangladesh. A reexamination is needed, she said, of how the state is criminalizing activities that were not considered a crime before. For instance, the business of gaza (a drug) was not criminalized in this subcontinent until 1974. Suddenly, many people who were dependent on the business discovered that they were criminals according to a new law promulgated by the state. So, it is necessary to question the power that enjoys the privilege of deciding whether an activity will be considered a crime or not. She said that most drug dealers who enter prisons are only petty drug peddlers. The real culprits of the business always remain behind the scenes. The state cannot get hold of them or punish them, mostly because they are part of the very power that defines crime and criminals in a society. They also indirectly control the prisons.

Therefore, it is important to differentiate between structural crimes and real crimes. Otherwise, the peddlers will always go to jail, while the perpetrator of a crime will remain untouched. Most criminals living in prisons, according to her, are structural criminals. The key limitation of the prison system is that it can punish only the individuals, not the structure. As she stated, “at present, the overall structure of the prisons is itself a torture. Incarceration itself is a

violence. A woman living in a Bangladeshi jail needs no other punishment but the very act of her incarceration. The current prison structure can, of course, discipline a person in the Foucauldian sense of the word. However, it cannot transform a bad person into a good person.” In Dutch prisons, she argued, there are provisions of conjugal visits. A visitor can talk with a prisoner sitting in a café. No such development can be supposed to take place in Bangladeshi prisons. Yet, the state has succeeded in manufacturing public consent for the prison structure by using media, schools, society, and other institutions.

Khandaker Raquib, a PhD researcher at the University of California, argued that the main problem of Bangladeshi prisons is the presence of a large number of pretrial and under-trial prisoners. A dynamic and vibrant judiciary with a proactive bureaucracy, which is absent currently, can significantly reduce the number of under-trial prisoners. Therefore, he emphasized pressurizing the judiciary to solve the problem of overpopulation in prisons. He also repudiated the idea of private prisons because of the small number of convicted prisoners. Confronted with the question of abolishing prisons, he said that less than 0.1 million people out of a population of nearly 18 million are living in prisons in Bangladesh. The intensity of the problem, which incited the abolitionist movements in countries like the USA, is not present in Bangladesh. He stressed the need to contextualize Western ideas instead of blindly imitating them. In the USA, he said, the average daily expense for an inmate is more than 100\$. When we compare Bangladeshi prisons with developed countries, we tend to be forgetful of the socio-economic reality of Bangladesh.

Shireen Huq, founder of Naripokkho, saw the whole issue from a human rights perspective. She said that the incarceration itself is a punishment for a criminal. However, the prison authorities and most citizens believe that incarceration is not enough and physical, psychological, and sexual suffering must be inflicted upon a criminal to ensure his/her punishment. She further stated that the popularity of retributive justice in our society is, an obstacle in the way of reaching a rehabilitation-based criminal justice system. Regarding alternatives to female imprisonment, she said that if a woman commits a crime, she should be given a second chance to correct herself. Thus, psychological counselling should be provided to the women involved in domestic violence cases, since crimes like these are often socio-economically structured, and it is not possible to correct and rehabilitate these women through imprisonment or punishment of any kind. While commenting on how to overcome the socio-economic and cultural barriers to prison reforms, she emphasized the need to

arrange dialogues in the public sphere to propagate reform ideas among a larger audience. As most people are not aware of the problems of prisons, activists have to work hard to mitigate the invisibility of prisons. Mass media can provide significant assistance in doing this, she remarked.

Barrister Sara Hossain accentuated the inadequacy of legal actions taken to mitigate the miseries of female prisoners. Pointing at the underutilization of the Special Privileges for the Convicted Women Prisoners Act (2006), she said that criminal lawyers do not show much interest in applying for probation under this Act, although there were directives from the Chief Justice to utilize this law. Therefore, substituting the law with a new one will not work if lawyers are not proactive on their part. According to her, another problem is the shortage of probation officers. The lawyers also do not contact the probation officers, and eventually, very few receive the special privileges a woman prisoner is supposed to enjoy. She further argued that it is not the responsibility of a prisoner to study criminal laws. It is the duty of her lawyer, her legal representative, to inform her of the legal facilities she is entitled to. However, most criminal lawyers do not contact their clients living in jail unless the client is very rich or a VIP. Changes must come in the nature of their practices, she said. Hence, instead of waiting for next-generation lawyers, training should be given to existing lawyers and probation officers so that they become more aware of the application of probation laws.

While asked to comment on the alternatives of female imprisonment, Sara Hossain said that most female prisoners go to jails for minor offenses, and there should be provisions for Non-custodial Measures for them. She problematized the use of imprisonment as a panacea and criticized the culture of keeping an under-trial person in jail custody and inflexibly denying bail. She linked this culture with public sentiment and the overwhelming popularity of retributive justice in society due to procrastination in the overall justice process. In developed countries, the governments must allocate a standard minimum amount of money on a prisoner. Therefore, those countries often adopt non-custodial measures for minor offenses to save public money. Since the government of Bangladesh has no such obligation regarding prisoners, Sara Hossain argued, it is not usually irritated by the presence of a large number of under-trial prisoners in jails. If the government is pressured to maintain international standards in prisons, the rate of detaining people will probably decrease.

However, since the international standards like the Bangkok Rules or Mandela Rules are not binding documents, Barrister Priya Ahsan Chowdhury argued, the prison authorities of Bangladesh can happily turn a blind eye to those standards while administering prisons. She acknowledged the need

to reform colonial penal laws of Bangladesh; however, she commented that basic needs of the prisoners can be met even under the current laws, if the government makes sincere efforts. There is no constitutional restraint, she argued, to provide prisoners with some extra facilities; so, the government can do it any time. Radical changes in prison architecture are not mandatory, she said; however, if necessary, the government can build specialized prisons for women, or, following the example of India, can build open prisons for women to improve the conditions of female imprisonment. However, pointing at the government's indulgence in the colonial mode of action, changes in practices must come with changes in laws. Otherwise, the basic needs of the prisoners shall not be fulfilled.

Barrister Priya considered pretrial imprisonment as a violation of the 'presumption of innocence' principle. She questions the bail practices in the lower courts, where women are not granted bail even if they are legally entitled to it. She argued that, in case of bailable offenses, the court is obligated to grant bail. In case of non-bailable offenses, an individual has to depend on the decision of the court, but bail can also be granted there. If the accused is a woman, the court has the jurisdiction to grant bail even in cases where the punishment is a death sentence or life sentence, according to a specific law promulgated in the colonial era. Even then, it never happens in the lower court. No reason is shown as to why the bail is not being granted. It is often said that the accused woman can commit a crime again, but no strong and valid reason is shown as to why she would do so. She also suggested that the government provide special training to all (police, prosecutors, jail police, jailors, etc.) who are involved in dealing with female criminals and prisoners. When asked how to ensure the legal representation of destitute female prisoners, she opined that the government should act in collaboration with NGOs and civil society organizations in that regard.

Nurjahan Khatun, a criminologist who researched female criminality in Bangladesh and visited several prisons, shared valuable insights on how to improve the condition of female imprisonment in Bangladesh. She noted that, being a specialized jail for females, Kashimpur jail has multiple facilities like a library, daycare centre, division, kitchen, canteen, parlor, etc. However, other prisons do not provide these facilities to women, since female wards in these jails are more confined and congested. It is a must to mitigate this infrastructural discrimination to ensure equal treatment to female prisoners across jails. She argued that when financially solvent prisoners avail extralegal approaches to fulfill their needs in jail, they tend to ignore or forget the miseries of common prisoners. For example, when a woman regularly buys food from the canteen, she does not show any interest in the improvement of the daily diet in jail. She prefers purchasing facilities from corrupt *Kayedis* and becomes an indirect stakeholder of the corrupt prison management. The

prison authorities should impose, argued Nurjahan Khatun, a particular limit on the amount of money a prisoner keeps in her Prisoner's Cash Card (PC Card). Otherwise, the corruption will not decrease, and the rich will rule the prison, while the poor will rot silently. Since rich prisoners build gangs in jails by capitalizing on the insolvency of common prisoners, the limit on usable money will also help decrease prison violence significantly.

She also criticized the lack of government attention in addressing the structural issues of female criminality. Emphasizing the need to curb socio-economic inequality, she said, poverty reduction would definitely cause a crime reduction. If the structural inequalities are not addressed, prisons will not be able to correct individuals. Unfortunately, no record of prisoners' recidivism and crime recurrence rate is kept after their release, she argued. There needs to be a monitoring system to smooth and facilitate the aftercare and rehabilitation of prisoners. In many countries, a defendant undergoes medical and psychological screening and is provided with need-specific training and facilities. The government can introduce similar systems, suggested Nurjahan Khatun.

Now that we are aware of the different aspects of female imprisonment in Bangladesh, we should focus on the relevant government action and civil society efforts to see whether there is any light of hope ahead of us. We found a very encouraging example of coordinated initiatives that provided legal, financial and other support to the female prisoners. Under a project titled 'Improvement of the Real Situation of Overcrowding in Prisons in Bangladesh (IRSOP)', a project co-financed by the government of Bangladesh and GIZ, the Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) provided legal and para-legal support to numerous female prisoners from 19 January 2009 to 30 September 2022. The area of the project includes Barishal, Bogura, Chattogram, Cumilla, Dhaka, Dinajpur, Faridpur, Gazipur, Jashore, Khulna, Kushtia, Mymensingh, Noakhali, Naogaon, Pabna, Patuakhali, Rajshahi, Rangpur, Sylhet, Sunamganj, and Tangail. Statistics show that nearly one thousand female prisoners were released under the project and numerous others received different kinds of support.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to present a comprehensive picture of the living conditions of female prisoners in Bangladesh and to suggest policy recommendations to improve the conditions. While it is difficult to cover all aspects of prison life in a single research report, this study tried to identify

the key problems of female imprisonment and to suggest future pathways towards a better, more humane, and more gender-sensitive criminal justice system in Bangladesh. Another important finding of this study, the causes of the current misery of female prisoners are manifold. It is not possible to bring sustainable changes solely by increasing the prison budget and ensuring infrastructural development. Unless we can empathize with the prisoners and see their lives from a different light, it is not possible to bring impactful and exemplary changes in the system that governs the lives of female prisoners. In 1918, Rosa Luxemburg, a female prisoner herself, wrote in a famous article titled ‘A Duty of Honour’, demanding the abolition of capital punishment in Germany. We want to conclude this study by emulating Rosa’s words that it must be considered a duty of honor to sympathize with female prisoners, the most invisible population in Bangladesh, and seek alternatives to imprisonment for their correction, well-being, and long-term rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

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## Appendix

### Additional Tables

#### Profiles of the Respondents

<b>RE-SPON-DENTS</b>	<b>CASE</b>	<b>YEAR OF BEING INCARCER-ATED</b>	<b>Name of Prison</b>	<b>Duration of Incar-ceration</b>
Res-1	Theft case	2020	Kashimpur Central Jail	3-4 days
Res-2	Special Powers Act	2023	Kashimpur Central Jail	47 days
Res-3	Digital Security Act	2017	Rangamati District Jail	10 days
Res-4	Waging war against the government, vandalism and others	2021	Kashimpur Central Jail	18 days
Res-5	Waging war against the government, vandalism and others	2021	Kashimpur Central Jail	18 days
Res-6	Arms case, Robbery case	1991, 2011	Old central prison of Naz-imuddin road, Kashimpur Central Jail	17 days, 5 months
Res-7	Arson and vandal-ism case	2024	Kashimpur Central Jail	17 days
Res-8	Digital Security Act	2022, 2024	Rajbari District Jail	4 months, one month
Res-9	Waging war against the government, vandalism and others	2017,2018	Khagrachari District Jail	4 days, one month
Res-10	Special Powers Act	2018	Barisal Central Jail	7 days
Res-11	Arson and vandal-ism	2023	SatkhiraDistrict Jail	2 days
Res-12	Digital Security Act	2020	Kashimpur Central Jail	15 months
Res-13	Digital Security Act	2020	Kashimpur Central Jail	3 years
Res-14	Narcotics Control Act	2024	Kashimpur Central Jail	10 days
Res-15	Section 54	2025	Kashimpur Central Jail	7 days

Res-16	Robbery case	2024	Kashimpur Central Jail	10 days
Res-17	Section 54	1980s, 2019	Kashimpur Central Jail, Old Central Jail	A few days, a month
Res-18	Anti-Terrorism Act	2018	Narsingdi District jail, Kashimpur Central Jail	6 years and 7 months
Res-19	Anti-Terrorism Act	2018	Narsingdi District Jail, Narayanganj District Jail	6 years and 7 months
Res-20	Vandalism	2018	Kashimpur Central Jail	10 days
Res-21	Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act	2025	Kashimpur Central Jail	14 days, 4 days
Res-22	Narcotics Control Act	2025	Kashimpur Central Jail	3 months
Res-23	Narcotics Control Act	2024	Kashimpur Central Jail	A few days per arrest
Res-24	Narcotics Control Act	2025	Kashimpur Central Jail	5 months 3 days
Res-25	Narcotics Control Act	2025	Kashimpur Central Jail	A few days per arrest

### Profiles of the Experts

Name of Experts	Area of Expertise
Barrister Priya Ahsan Chowdhury	Advocate, Supreme Court of Bangladesh
Barrister Sara Hossain	Senior Advocate, Supreme Court of Bangladesh
Shireen Huq	Founding member, Naripokkho
Nurjahan Khatun	Assistant Professor, Dept. of Criminology and Police Science, MBSTU
Nasrin Shiraj Annie	Former Assistant Professor, Dept. of Anthropology, BRAC
Khandakar Raquib	Graduate Teaching Assistant, Dept. of Anthropology, University of California, Irvine.

### Legal Aid and Other Services Provided by the Govt. of Bangladesh, GIZ & BLAST

Name of Activity	Women	Men	Children	Others	Total
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Legal Service Information Desk/ Advice	6471	17,313	11	1	23,796
Emergency Help-line	3,682	5,535	-	2	9,223
Paralegal Advisory Service At CDC			Boys-565 Girls-74		639
CDC Interventions (Pre/Post release)	-	-	Boys-1048 Girls-63	-	1111
Children Released From CDC	-	-	Boys-74 Girls-4	-	78
Support Inside Prison	18,222	113,862	313	9	132,406
Support at police station	5,456	15,829	26	3	21,314
Prisoners released through legal support	995	17,369	119	1	18,448
Interventions inside prison	84,007	544,334	1894	44	630,349
Referred to DLAC (Legal support)	1979	30,778	26	3	21,314
Advice	-	-	-	-	552
Mediation	-	-	-	-	106
Litigation	-	-	-	-	56
Emergency Technical Support	-	-	-	-	9,223
Deposit Fine (Person)	-	-	-	-	118
Transportation cost for prisoners (Person)	-	-	-	-	658
Released through Virtual court	-	-	-	-	545
Distributed Survival Packages	-	-	-	-	2538