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Lived Experiences of Female Prisoners in Samar

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ABSTRACT

Although prison life is widely studied, the experiences of women in Philippine provincial facilities remain under-researched. This qualitative case study explored the lived experiences of 11 pre-trial female detainees in two provincial jails in Samar to identify gender-specific challenges within the correctional system. Semi-structured interviews were analyzed thematically, revealing five primary themes: life before incarceration, emotional responses, prisoners' needs, challenges in prison life, and coping mechanisms. Results indicate that while detainees demonstrate resilience and solidarity, they endure significant hardships, including prolonged legal delays, family separation, and inadequate institutional support. Grounded in Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Rogers' humanistic theory, the analysis demonstrates how unmet psychological and physical needs undermine inmate dignity. The study concludes that the intersection of gender and justice in provincial contexts necessitates urgent gender-responsive policies. Significant recommendations include improving access to mental health services, livelihood programs, and family support systems to facilitate successful rehabilitation and reintegration.

Keywords: Female inmates; Gender-responsive justice; Incarcerated women; Provincial jails; Psychosocial survival

INTRODUCTION

While women constitute less than 10% of the incarcerated population in the Philippines (BJMP, 2022), their presence within the penal system creates a distinct set of humanitarian and sociological challenges. Recent global data indicates that this population is the fastest-growing demographic in the carceral system; between 2000 and 2022, the global female prison population increased by 59%, a rate that significantly outpaces the 22% increase observed in men (Fair & Walmsley, 2022; UNODC, 2025).

In Southeast Asia, this trend is even more pronounced. Regional studies from 2020–2025 highlight that the "War on Drugs" and punitive penalization policies have disproportionately impacted women, particularly in Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines, where drug-related offenses account for a majority of female detentions (Emerald Insight, 2020; UNODC, 2025). Unlike their male counterparts, female detainees often navigate a "double burden" of incarceration: the loss of physical liberty and the profound disruption of gendered social roles, particularly as primary caregivers. Abao (2019) notes that these women face unique vulnerabilities, including reproductive health issues and enduring social stigma.

These vulnerabilities were further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies conducted between 2021 and 2025 reveal that the suspension of visitation and "prison lock-ins" disproportionately harmed women's mental health by severing critical bonds with children and limiting access to external material support for menstrual and reproductive hygiene (Bristol et al., 2021; Agbaria et al., 2025). In low-resource settings, this led to what researchers now describe as a "crisis of care" where women were forced to rely on surrogate social bonds for survival (Taylor & Francis, 2025).

Despite the establishment of the Bangkok Rules and recent regional frameworks like the ASEAN Declaration on Gender-Responsive Implementation (2025), administrative focus in provincial jails often remains centered on the male majority. This study addresses this critical gap by exploring the lived experiences of female detainees in the provincial jails of Samar, aligning local findings with the global shift toward gender-responsive carceral reform.

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Research Design

This study employed a qualitative single case study design to explore the nuanced and subjective experiences of female detainees in a localized context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This design was selected because it allows for an in-depth, holistic interpretation of the psychosocial realities of participants within the bounded system of provincial jails in Samar. By focusing on a single case—the experience of female incarceration in this specific region—the research produces a rich, contextualized account that captures the interplay between individual agency and institutional constraints.

Participants and Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling technique was utilized to select 11 pre-trial female detainees from two provincial jails in Samar. The inclusion criteria required participants to be currently incarcerated, awaiting trial, and willing to share their personal narratives. The sample size was determined by the principle of data saturation, where no new themes or insights emerged from subsequent interviews. The participants varied in age, educational attainment, and length of detention, providing a diverse spectrum of perspectives on the conditions and challenges of the provincial penal system.

Research Instrument

The primary data collection tool was a researcher-made, semi-structured interview guide. To ensure the instrument's validity and appropriateness, it underwent expert validation by a panel of three specialists in psychology and criminal justice. The guide was designed to be flexible, allowing participants to narrate their experiences freely while ensuring that core topics—such as emotional responses, institutional challenges, and coping mechanisms—were addressed. A pilot interview was conducted with a former detainee to refine the questions for clarity and sensitivity before the actual data collection.

Data Gathering Procedure

Data were gathered through face-to-face, in-depth interviews conducted during official jail visitation hours. Each session lasted between 45 to 90 minutes and took place in private areas within the facility to ensure a safe environment for disclosure. The researcher began by establishing rapport and explaining the study's objectives. With the explicit consent of the participants, the interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Field notes were also maintained to document non-verbal cues and environmental observations that added depth to the verbal data.

Data Analysis Procedure

The qualitative data were analyzed using the six-phase thematic analysis framework established by Braun and Clarke (2006). This systematic process involved: (1) familiarization with the transcripts, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing and refining themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. HyperResearch software was employed to assist in the management and coding of the data. To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, the researcher utilized member-checking, where preliminary findings were shared with several participants to verify that the interpretations accurately reflected their lived experiences.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to strict ethical protocols and received clearance from the Institutional Research Ethics Review Committee of Samar State University. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained in the local dialect to ensure full comprehension.

To protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the detainees, pseudonyms were used throughout the manuscript, and all identifying details were removed. Recognizing the sensitive nature of the topic, a licensed counselor was placed on standby to provide immediate psychosocial support should any participant experience emotional distress during the interview process.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Case Presentation

The participants of this study were non-convicted female detainees. All legal cases filed against them had already been brought to court but remained unresolved at the time of the study, pending the court's final decision. A total of 11 participants were selected and arranged for interviews.

Table 1 presents the biographical profiles of the 11 female detainees, indicating their civil status, Prison-based livelihood, highest educational attainment, occupation before incarceration, case involved, and duration of stay in prison, the nature of their case, and duration of stay in prison.

Table 1: Respondents' Demographic Profile

Participant	Civil Status	Educational Attainment	Pre-Incarceration Occupation	Case Involved	Duration of Stay	Prison-Based Livelihood
1	Married	Elementary Level	Farmer	Illegal Possession of Explosives	4.0 years	Candle-making
2	Single	College Graduate	Housekeeper	Illegal Possession of Explosives	9.0 years	Candle-making & Retail
3	Married	High School Graduate	Unemployed	Robbery with Homicide	8.0 years	None
4	Single	High School Level	Seamstress	Human Trafficking	12.0 years	Food Stall
5	Married	College Graduate	Businesswoman	Violation of Dangerous Drugs Act	5.0 years	None
6	Single	College Level	Networking Agent	Violation of Dangerous Drugs Act	5.4 years	None
7	Widowed	High School Level	None	Kidnapping	2.0 years	None
8	Single	Elementary Level	Sex worker	Human Trafficking	0.8 years	None
9	Cohabiting	College Level	Unemployed	Violation of Dangerous Drugs Act	0.9 years	None
10	Married	Elementary Level	Vendor	Human Trafficking	1.5 years	Laundry Services
11	Cohabiting	High School Level	Housekeeper	Human Trafficking	3.0 years	None

Thematic Results

Five overarching themes emerged from the data: (1) Comfort in Life before Incarceration, (2) Emotional Responses to Incarceration, (3) Prisoners' Needs and Priorities, (4) Challenges in Prison Life, and (5) Coping Mechanisms.

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Theme 1: Comfort in Life Before Incarceration

Participants contrasted their current hardships with the stable lives they led prior to imprisonment. For many, "comfort" was defined by simple freedoms and family presence. One participant recalled the joy of agricultural life: “From the very beginning... we were happy working on the farm. I helped my parents until we were able to have our own livelihood.” Others highlighted the financial agency they once possessed, with one woman noting that while life outside was simple, “I could still earn money and recover. Here inside prison, there is really nothing.” These reflections underscore how incarceration represents a "pains of imprisonment" (Sykes, 1958) that disrupts women’s everyday roles and sense of identity (Masekoameng et al., 2023).

Theme 2: Emotional Responses to Incarceration

Subtheme A: Perceived Injustice

Feelings of being unjustly detained were common. One participant described the visceral shock of arrest: “It truly feels very bad to be arrested, especially when you are innocent.” Others pointed toward systemic failings, noting that many inmates are “innocent but still [detained].”

These sentiments echo critiques of the Philippine justice system, where prolonged pretrial detention fuels deep emotional wounds (Narag, 2020).

Subtheme B: Remorse and Accountability

Conversely, some participants embraced accountability. One woman admitted, “I did not listen to my parents’ advice... That’s why I ended up here.” This reflects the "moral injury" described by Roth et al. (2022), where regret serves as a step toward reframing one’s identity.

Subtheme C: Yearning for Connection

Separation from children was cited as the most painful aspect of confinement. One mother shared: “I really miss my children... It breaks my heart... I just say, ‘I’ll make it up to you once I’m out.’” This mirrors findings by Maedzenge and Beichner-Thomas (2023) regarding the persistent grief and yearning for family ties in female carceral settings.

Theme 3: Prisoners’ Needs and Priorities

Subtheme A: Livelihood and Recreational Programs

Access to structured activity was viewed as a survival necessity. One participant stressed that “livelihood should be for all... especially during the pandemic when no visits were allowed.” Others suggested educational reforms, noting that studying would allow them to “keep learning despite confinement.”

Subtheme B: Reforms in the Justice System

Frustration with "justice delayed" was a recurring sentiment. One inmate lamented, “Hopefully, our hearings will not always be rescheduled. It’s been taking too long,” while another highlighted the extreme delay of having “only had two hearings” in over five years.

Theme 4: Challenges in Prison Life

Subtheme A: Struggles of Adaptation

Adaptation requires navigating collective punishment and interpersonal friction. One participant explained, “Everyone is affected when some prisoners misbehave... Even we who follow the rules are punished.”

To survive, women prioritized "relational management" (Brown & Bloom, 2022), with one noting, “I stay away from gossip and only talk about what is necessary.”

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Subtheme D: Experiences of Discrimination

The "spoiled identity" (Goffman, 1963) of the prisoner persists beyond the walls. One participant observed, “Once they know you have been in prison, it’s as if your value as a person has diminished.”

Theme 5: Coping Mechanisms

Subtheme B: Resourcefulness and Perseverance

Women reclaimed agency through small-scale income generation. One participant shared, “I used to sell coffee... and now I also know candle-making, which helps me save a little.” These acts of perseverance provide both financial relief and psychological resilience (Schliehe, 2021).

Subtheme C: Acceptance of Circumstances

Long-term stayers often turned to cognitive reframing: “After almost nine years... I had no choice but to accept my situation... I learned to accept it.”

Overall, this theme shows that female detainees are not passive recipients of incarceration but active agents who develop practical, emotional, and spiritual strategies for survival. Through respect, resourcefulness, acceptance, and hope, they sustained resilience in an environment marked by loss, uncertainty, and stigma.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of female prisoners in Samar, revealing a complex intersection of personal resilience and systemic vulnerability.

The findings highlight the "double burden" of incarceration: the physical loss of liberty compounded by the profound emotional strain of separation from family and the navigation of a justice system characterized by prolonged legal processes.

Despite these hardships, the narratives demonstrate significant human agency, as seen through the women’s resourcefulness, surrogate solidarity, and cognitive adaptation. These insights provide a critical localized perspective, underscoring the urgent need for gender-responsive reforms that prioritize dignity and rehabilitation within provincial carceral settings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed to align provincial jail management with international human rights standards:

Judicial Efficiency & Restorative Justice: Prioritize the "Continuous Trial Guidelines" to mitigate the psychological trauma of prolonged pretrial detention and ensure that justice is neither delayed nor denied.

Gender-Responsive Well-Being: Facilitate consistent family visitation—including virtual "e-dalaw" options—to maintain the maternal bonds that are central to the emotional stability of female inmates.

Sustainable Livelihood & Education: Move beyond "token" activities toward structured vocational training (e.g., the candle-making and retail skills identified in Table 1) that offers both immediate financial relief and long-term reintegration value.

Integrated Mental Health Care: Implement routine psychological screening and therapeutic interventions (art, music, or spiritual counseling) to address the "moral injury" and anxiety inherent in the total institution.

Protection of Human Rights: Ensure strict adherence to the Bangkok Rules, specifically targeting the elimination of discrimination and the provision of gender-specific healthcare and hygiene.

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Enlarged Limitations and Methodological Trustworthiness

To enhance the transparency and academic rigor of this inquiry, it is essential to contextualize the scope of its findings through a critical lens of transferability and trustworthiness:

Contextual Transferability: As this study focused on the provincial jails of Samar, the findings are "context-bound." While they offer deep "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of the rural carceral experience, they may not represent the dynamics of high-density metropolitan facilities. However, the themes of maternal longing and systemic delay serve as a representative "snapshot" of the broader Philippine provincial experience.

Methodological Transparency: The reliance on qualitative semi-structured interviews allowed for an authentic centering of marginalized voices. To bolster trustworthiness, future research should employ triangulation by integrating quantitative data (mixed-methods) to correlate demographic variables—such as length of stay or educational level—with psychological well-being scores.

Call for Multi-Site Longitudinal Research: To improve the "auditability" of these results, follow-up research should be conducted across multiple sites (e.g., comparing Samar with Leyte or Northern Samar). A longitudinal approach tracking women from incarceration through post-release reintegration would provide a more robust evidence base for policy shifts, identifying exactly where the system succeeds or fails in breaking the cycle of recidivism.

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