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What women want - Prison diaries

The state of India's penal and justice systems, largely influenced by a colonial hangover, holds a mirror to the true nature of human rights and social equality in our country. Accused persons awaiting trial endure inordinate delays — in 2002, nearly three quarters of all persons held in prisons were “under trial”. They live in abominable conditions what Fyodor Dostoyevsky describes in *The House of the Dead* as being “buried alive and shut up in a coffin”. Unlike their male counterparts, women prisoners are mostly victims of circumstances. Those with children do not get access to them after a particular age, when they are sent to Government homes. Women prisoners are denied access to their homes, family and children after their release. While activists work towards bettering the status of women prisoners, the bureaucrat and women we spoke to agree that a broader outlook is needed to uplift the condition of women prisoners.

A novel experiment

India's first open jail for women was inaugurated last month at the Yerawada Central Prison, Pune. This is a historic measure unfolding as it does in the centenary year of the International Women's Day. Initially, 50 out of the 500 women prisoners, mostly lifers lodged in the Byculla (in Mumbai) and Yerawada (in Pune) jails would be selected for the open jail. The criteria are seniority and good behaviour, and we have chosen to implement it among Indian nationals. Women in the open jail would be made to do agricultural work on the 17 acres of land adjoining the prison. This would improve their physical and mental well-being and make them eligible for remission in their punishment — for every year served in the open jail, a year would be reduced from their sentence. Additionally, they would also be trained in other skills such as candle-making and screen printing to help them start a new life after being released from jail. Our thrust is on equality — the open system is available for men prisoners, it should be available for women too.

Medha Gadgil, IAS

Principal Secretary, Home (Appeal and Security)

Government of Maharashtra

Crucial linkages

As part of its work, the Gaitonde Foundation (YRG Care) conducts HIV-awareness programmes among prisoners. Interestingly, most women we met and interacted, participated wholeheartedly, and exhibited a sense of self confidence and knowledge about HIV/AIDS. As regards societal acceptance after release some women felt the transition was traumatic, due to the paucity of rehabilitative resources for women with mental health concerns. I would like a critical social

intervention to address mental health issues of women prisoners, and strengthen social ties to ease the community re-entry process. Also there should be more links between mental health providers, communities and social support groups.



Sethulakshmi
Manager, Community Outreach Services
YRG CARE, Chennai

Know your rights

Correction India works for the welfare of prisoners and their families. We counsel prisoners on de-addiction from alcohol and drugs. This programme, conducted in all Kerala prisons, has now been started in Tamil Nadu also. Along with a team I conduct special musical programs, film shows, and special entertainment with a moral message, for the prisoners and officials. Upon their release, we give prisoners who are part of our programme, shelter and rehabilitate them. Our Aswasa Bhavan project is for prisoner's children. We focus on children who have either or both parents in prison. Such children lose out on education, food and shelter besides undergoing social stigma. This programme is called Aruthal Illam in Tamil Nadu and is run in Theni. Women prisoners do suffer indifference and are also often taunted about their crime. A checklist must be made on all female prisoners under the age of 18 years, to determine if it is in their best interests to mingle with those aged 18 years and above. Also the design and furnishing of women's prisons should take into account the particular needs of women. And, women must be made aware of their rights including medical related ones such as the national cervical screening programme, and mammography for those above 50.



Anina Joseph Mathew
Founder
Corrections India, Pampady, Kottayam

Need to nurture

Our country allows a woman prisoner to keep her child with her till the age of five. This is distressing for the mother, and India Vision Foundation, started by Dr. Kiran Bedi, seeks to address that. We conduct vocational training projects inside Tihar Prison for women inmates, and they are compensated for their efforts in weaving tapestries and making coasters, etc. Besides providing them financial independence, this also helps them utilise their time constructively. Our Creche Project aims to improve and enhance the physical, social and emotional well-being of the children living in prison. We endeavour to nurture and inculcate moral values in children, and help them regain their childhood. Such training helps women inmates fulfil their daily requirements, and also helps their children continue their education.

Monica Dhawan

Project Manager (Prison project)

India Vision Foundation, New Delhi

Give them a chance

Our NGO, Krupa works among prisoners at the Puzhal prisons for men and women. We primarily focus at providing prisoners a skill — computer usage, jute bag making, block printing, mushroom cultivation, tailoring and embroidery — that will help them earn a living after completing their sentence. We also counsel them on a personal value system, and help them accept that they will find things difficult after their release. They also get an opportunity to share their fears, longings, aspirations and concerns. Our aim is to ensure that women prisoners leave with their self esteem intact. I would like to see a situation where a person is not punished more than once for the same crime — prison term apart, the prisoner and the family also face social ostracisation. For women, such rejection can be degrading physically, emotionally and intellectually. People need to realise that many prisoners have been involved in crime due to force of circumstances, and need a chance to re-establish themselves. Ultimately, we would like to see reconciliation between the families of the prisoner and the victim of the crime.

Grace Browning

Director

Krupa Ministries, Chennai