

Indian wives of incarcerated men tell their stories: An intersectional narrative analysis of  
disenfranchisement and resilience

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Dissertation submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University  
in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Human Development and Family Science

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April 17, 2024

Blacksburg, Virginia

Keywords: Spousal incarceration, intersectional feminism, resilience, symbolic interactionism

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## **Abstract**

When a family member is incarcerated, the task of emotionally and financially supporting the remaining family members and the incarcerated loved one often falls upon women, who are likely to be under-resourced and overwhelmed. Women whose husbands are incarcerated in India are likely to possess multiple marginalized identities, increasing their vulnerability to intersecting forms of oppression. Empirical research is lacking on wives of incarcerated men in India, contributing to their invisibility in policy-making and programmatic interventions. Guided by intersectional feminism and symbolic interactionism, the purpose of this study was to document the stories of women who had experienced spousal incarceration in the Indian context. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 wives of prison inmates who resided in or around the National Capital Territory of Delhi, all of whom either held a lower caste identity or a Muslim religious identity. Transcribed interviews were analyzed following the steps of narrative analysis. Results illustrate the diversity of storied experiences of wives of incarcerated husbands in India. First, by grouping narratives that conveyed the same overall storyline into the same cluster, I identified three story clusters: *Ambivalent but Hanging On*, *Unconditionally Devoted*, and *Independent and Disillusioned*. Second, by attending to how women's day-to-day lives are shaped by intersecting systems of privilege and oppression, particularly those tied to gender and class, I identified three overarching themes that spanned women's narratives: (a) *a complicated relationship with patriarchy*, (b) *the weight of socioeconomic disenfranchisement*, and (c) *when resilience is not a choice*. The results of this study emphasize the need to distinguish between feminist agency and welfare agency, to recognize women's experiences of ambiguous loss and disenfranchised grief, and to critique the systemic injustices that forced women to be resilient. Documenting their stories is instrumental in bringing attention to the needs, challenges, and triumphs of this underserved and overlooked population.

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## **General Audience Abstract**

When a family member is incarcerated, the task of emotionally and financially supporting the remaining family members and the incarcerated loved one often falls upon women, who are likely to be under-resourced and overwhelmed. Women whose husbands are incarcerated in India are likely to possess multiple marginalized identities, increasing their vulnerability to intersecting forms of oppression. Empirical research is lacking on wives of incarcerated men in India, contributing to their invisibility in policy-making and programmatic interventions. The purpose of this study was to document the stories of women who had experienced spousal incarceration in the Indian context. Interviews were conducted with 14 wives of prison inmates who resided in or around the National Capital Territory of Delhi, all of whom either held a lower caste identity or a Muslim religious identity. Results illustrate the diversity of women's stories and experiences with spousal incarceration. First, by grouping narratives that conveyed the same overall storyline into the same cluster, I identified three story clusters: *Ambivalent but Hanging On*, *Unconditionally Devoted*, and *Independent and Disillusioned*. Second, by attending to how women's day-to-day lives are shaped by intersecting systems of privilege and oppression, particularly those tied to gender and class, I identified three overarching themes that characterized women's narratives: (a) *a complicated relationship with patriarchy*, (b) *the weight of socioeconomic disenfranchisement*, and (c) *when resilience is not a choice*. The results of this study emphasize the need to distinguish between feminist agency and welfare agency, to recognize women's experiences of ambiguous loss and disenfranchised grief, and to critique the systemic injustices that forced women to be resilient. Documenting their stories is instrumental in bringing attention to the needs, challenges, and triumphs of this underserved and overlooked population.

## **Acknowledgements**

This dissertation has been my life's biggest dream which could not have come true without the love, care, and thoughtfulness of my friends, family, and mentors. Words are not enough to express the gratitude I have in my heart for the support and consideration I received from my loved ones throughout this journey.

This PhD would not have been possible without the encouragement, support, mentorship, and guidance of my chair, Dr. Caroline Sanner. Her belief in me and in the direction, I wanted to take was equal parts empowering and reassuring. Her confidence in me helped me believe in myself. She was there for me every step of the way, not just as a brilliant academic but also as a caring mentor, who showed up for me each and every single time. She gave me the autonomy and freedom to be as creative as I wanted to be, making this journey fulfilling and fun. I will forever cherish this relationship.

I am very thankful to my committee members, Dr. Bonnie Zare, Dr. TeKisha Rice, and Dr. Erika Grafsky for their investment and involvement in this dissertation. I am thankful to them for giving me the space to express myself freely in every interaction and for making me feel supported. Their insights and knowledge were very helpful in bolstering this study.

I am also grateful to my first advisor and mentor, Dr. Joyce Arditti. Following her work and reading her academic articles motivated me to write to her and come to Virginia Tech to pursue this PhD in the first place. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to work with her and learn from her during the first year of this degree. I want to especially acknowledge and mention the support and love I received from Dr. Katherine Allen. She was a mentor who was always present, with her sagely wisdom, encouraging words and loving presence. I am extremely blessed to have her in my corner! I also wish to thank Dr. Rose Weshe, who has been a

wonderful mentor to me. I am thankful to have been able to work with her in the HEAR lab. She gave me the opportunity to hone my research and writing skills and be involved in multiple exciting research projects. This acknowledgement section would be absolutely incomplete without mentioning Dr. Neelam Sukhramani. It was through my involvement in her research study at Jamia Millia Islamia that I developed an interest in studying spousal incarceration. I am very thankful for her incredible mentorship and support.

I owe the biggest thank you to my parents who have always been in my corner, cheering me on in everything I do. They believed in me and supported me in my decision to pursue this PhD. They have always prioritized my dreams and ambitions. I am so lucky to have them as my parents. I would not have been the person I am and definitely would not have been able to complete this PhD without them. Mom and dad, thank you for being the best parents one could have!

I want to extend a huge thank you to my partner in crime and life, Dibyojyoti Mainak for being my pillar of support throughout this journey. I am deeply indebted to his consideration, patience, advice, and support during moments of self-doubt and fear. I am very thankful to him for being my sounding board as well as the voice of reason and for celebrating each big and small triumph with such aplomb. Mainak, thank you for being just as invested in this dream as I have been, for nourishing it with care and seeing it to fruition with me. I truly lucked out to find such a supportive partner.

I am very thankful to my friends for their love, support, enthusiasm, and companionship. I am thankful for being able to confide in them, rant to them and celebrate with them. I want to especially thank my friends in the US, who were my family away from home and ensured that I never felt alone even as I was miles away from home. Finally, but very importantly, I want to

thank my friend Syeda Asia, without whose confidence and support, I would have never applied to this PhD program. Asia, thank you for being a friend who inspires me and always has my back.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### Background and Significance

Familial incarceration impacts millions of families all over the world. In the United States alone, almost *half* of the population – as many as 113 million people – have experienced the incarceration of an immediate family member during their lives, and one in seven adults have experienced the incarceration of their co-parent or spouse (Elderblom et al., 2018). The United States (U.S.) is the world's leader in incarceration, with nearly 2 million people in the country's prisons and jails, representing a 500% increase over the last 40 years (Sawyer & Wagner, 2022). In response to high incarceration rates, academics have become increasingly interested in the *collateral consequences* of incarceration – that is, the social, emotional, and financial repercussions of imprisonment for family members (Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999; Leigh, 2020; Newell, 2013; Sawyer & Wagner, 2020). Experiencing the imprisonment of a family member or a parent can be traumatic for children and other caregivers who are left behind to navigate a host of challenges (Arditti, 2012).

Although families of the incarcerated have received considerable scholarly attention in the U.S., they have received scant attention in the context of the developing world. In India, they remain a hidden population (Sukhramani & Gupta, 2020). Incarceration in India is highly stigmatized, and it is the most disadvantaged persons who are most likely to interface with the penal system. Families of the incarcerated are relegated to the margins of society, often subject to acute social stigma (e.g., scorn, apathy) and financial destitution (Chakrabarti, 1989; Sukhramani & Gupta, 2020). Further, because India is a developing country with a high proportion of poor households, the country's fiscal resources are not nearly enough to meet the needs of all those who require assistance (Pingali et al., 2019).

When a family member is incarcerated, the burden of caring for remaining family members, as well as the incarcerated family member, often falls upon the shoulders of women – namely, wives of the incarcerated (Braman, 2004; Codd, 2007; Condry, 2006). For women in India, the patriarchal nature of Indian society and associated trends (e.g., falling female labor force participation, the rise in women’s unpaid care work) likely makes the felt impact of spousal incarceration even more acute (Dutta, 2022). Additionally, they are likely to experience grave stigmatization, have limited economic opportunities and financial support, and be impacted by the dearth of programs for single mothers (Chakrabarti, 1989; Rani, 2006; Sukhramani & Gupta, 2020). Furthermore, it is highly likely that the women who interface with the criminal justice system in India are multiply marginalized, being lower caste, from minoritized religious backgrounds, and of lower socioeconomic status (Wagner, 2018). Consistent with an intersectional feminist perspective, the varied oppressed social identities that these women hold are likely to interact and compound their marginalization (Crenshaw, 1989).

We currently lack empirical research on the perspectives and experiences of prisoners’ wives in India. The absence of scholarship in this area has made this population invisible with regards to not just policy but also interventions designed to support women and children (Sukhramani & Gupta, 2020). It remains a critical scholarly task to examine and document the lived realities of this understudied population.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the present study was to document the stories of women who had experienced spousal incarceration in India. I addressed two overarching research questions:

1. What themes characterize the stories of women experiencing spousal incarceration in India?

2. How do Indian wives of incarcerated spouses make meaning of their experiences?

Guided by intersectional feminism and symbolic interactionism, this study employed narrative analysis. This project sought to center the voices of women, to allow them to tell their own stories, in their own words (Maynes et. al., 2012). Stories are a powerful way of personalizing and humanizing struggles, and stories preserve the voices of the women who tell them. Documenting the stories of wives of incarceration is a critical step in disseminating the struggles of an overlooked population – an opportunity to bring needed attention to the trials and tribulations of women experiencing spousal incarceration in India. Such visibility is necessary for advancing policy and programming that addresses the needs of prisoner’s wives and families in India. Such visibility is necessary for combatting widespread stigma directed at prisoner’s wives, such as dominant perceptions of them as ‘criminals’ themselves due to their proximity to the perpetrators of crime. Taken together, sharing women’s stories provides an opportunity to illuminate their experiences and challenge harmful stereotypes, overgeneralizations, and inaccurate narratives about women experiencing spousal incarceration in India (Maynes et al., 2012).

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I first review the literature on families of the incarcerated, focusing specifically on wives of incarcerated men. I draw primarily from research conducted in the developed world, given the lacuna of research conducted in developing countries. I then focus on the Indian context, drawing on existing literature focused on different forms of marginalization (e.g., class-based, caste-based, faith-based). I discuss each theme as it relates to wives of incarcerated men in India, in the absence of scholarly work that focuses on this specific population. Finally, I explain the theories that frame the proposed study: intersectional feminism and symbolic interactionism.

### **Families of the Incarcerated**

Families of the incarcerated are among the most vulnerable and marginalized of global populations (cf. Prison Reform Trust, 2021; Leigh, 2020). Incarcerated persons are more likely than the public to be disadvantaged in the first place, and incarceration exacerbates disadvantage. For instance, the criminalization of poverty as well as the challenges that are often accompanied by it (e.g., drug use), which are symptomatic of systemic oppression, have contributed to racial inequities in incarceration rates (Johnson, 2020). In the United States, mass incarceration policies disproportionately impact persons of color; nearly 40% of Black Americans are imprisoned, despite making up only 13% of the U.S. population (Sawyer & Wagner, 2020). In Australia, rates of incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults constitute nearly 27% of the prison population while constituting only 2% of the national population (Leigh, 2020).

Incarceration of a family member exacerbates financial, emotional, and social strife (Arditti et al., 2003; Braman, 2004). For instance, incarceration intensifies material disadvantage, both through potential loss of income and through the added financial costs of maintaining

contact with the incarcerated family member, securing legal representation, and providing economic support to the incarcerated family member during their confinement (Western & Wildeman, 2009). These costs are difficult to bear, especially if the remaining partner lacks employment. In a study with 56 caregivers, Arditti et al. (2003) found that caregivers with a partner in prison were likely to leave employment after their family member was jailed, possibly due to childcare challenges. In addition to material losses, the stigma associated with incarceration can adversely affect receipts of social support (Arditti et al., 2003). The social and economic disadvantages of incarceration have cumulative effects that deepen pre-existing hardships and reduce the possibilities of upward mobility (Western & Pettit, 2010). As a result, these cumulative disadvantages often are intergenerational and influence the inequalities experienced by successive generations of family members (Western & Pettit, 2010).

Most research on families and incarceration has focused on the impact of parental incarceration – that is, the effects of having an imprisoned parent on child development and well-being. Compared to their peers, children with incarcerated parents tend to be at higher risk for depressive symptoms, aggression, anti-social behavior, social exclusion, worse physical health, lower levels of educational success, and greater likelihood of future incarceration themselves (Arditti, 2012; Johnson & Easterling, 2012; Wildeman et al., 2018). The association between parental incarceration and child well-being has been found to be mediated by parenting (e.g., parenting stress, parental involvement, parental supervision) and indicators of socioeconomic status (e.g., material hardship, familial household income, number of hours worked per week) (Kjellstrand & Eddy, 2011; Poehlmann-Tynan & Turney, 2021). Researchers also have identified moderators of the association between parental incarceration and child outcomes, including race (the association between parental incarceration and behavioral problems has been found to be

stronger for White youth than for Black youth) and gender (the association between parental incarceration and behavioral problems has been found to be stronger for boys than for girls) (Haskins, 2015; Murray et al., 2012). Child maltreatment has been identified as a significant moderator, such that the lack of experience of sexual abuse by the incarcerated father was linked with greater symptoms of depression amongst female children (Swisher & Shaw-Smith, 2015).

Although most research has focused on the collateral consequences of incarceration for children, another major focus has been on the collateral consequences for *spouses* of the incarcerated – the focus of the present study. I now turn to research on the experiences of women with incarcerated husbands/ male partners.

### **Women's Experiences with Spousal Incarceration**

The present study is situated within, and builds upon, the literature on women's experiences with spousal incarceration. I organize this literature into three areas: (a) women and prison work, (b) women's relationships with incarcerated spouses, and (c) women's relationship with the carceral institution.

#### ***Women and Prison Work***

Caring for remaining family members as well as the imprisoned family member is a burden that often falls squarely upon the shoulders of the female relatives (Braman, 2004; Codd, 2007; Condry, 2006). This burden, mostly endured alone by female partners, wives, mother, and sisters, has been termed *prison work* (Codd, 2007). For wives of the incarcerated, incarceration is a turning point – one that involuntarily places them in relationship with the carceral institution and establishes them as the primary caregiver, sole provider, and single parent. Marrying Codd's articulation of *prison work* with Collin's (1994) concept of *motherwork* (i.e., "the paid and unpaid labor that mothers on the margins do to support their families and foster their children's

survival” [Arditti et al., 2021, p. 146]), Arditti and colleagues proposed the term *prison-motherwork* (p.157) as a framework for understanding the solitary and invisible labor of mothers during their partners’ incarceration and reentry. Based on in-depth narrative data of 16 Australian mothers experiencing the incarceration or reentry of their children’s father, Arditti and colleagues (2021) explored how mothers mediated father-child relationships in ways that safeguarded the welfare of their children and supported their partners through their prison term and reentry.

For wives/female partners of incarcerated men, the costs associated with prison work are high. Studies have shown that these women are vulnerable to a host of health challenges, including depression, anxiety, hypertension, and chronic pain (Braman, 2004; Wildeman et al., 2013). Studies have described ways in which female partners of incarcerated men neglect their health to take care of their families and imprisoned partners (Christian et al, 2006). Furthermore, experiencing longer prison sentences of their partners has been found to be more strongly associated with poorer health outcomes for female partners (Wildeman et al., 2013, 2019; Tadros et al., 2022).

In addition to experiencing severe social and economic strains, these women face many psychological hardships. The incarceration of their partner is akin to their partner’s social death, one which they do not have the societal permission to openly grieve. Thus, they often have to endure this shameful loss in secret, which in turn complicates their grief by causing feelings of embarrassment and guilt (Arditti, 2012). The burdens of incarceration are augmented by a societal context which has limited or no sympathy for families of incarcerated. While the entire family of a prison inmate is likely to endure the burden of societal stigma, partners of incarcerated persons are often especially stigmatized (Condry, 2006; Dallaire, Ciccone, &

Wilson, 2010). Studies suggest that these women are evaluated negatively for their choice of partners, are seen as 'contaminated' for their loyalty to their imprisoned partners and are viewed as worthy of blame or guilty by association for choosing to remain committed to their imprisoned partners (Bandebe 2014; Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2008; Condry, 2006). This stigmatization makes them vulnerable to undesired attention (Braman, 2004) and harassment (Moerings, 1992), which in turn means that they constantly attempt to avoid these undesired social overtures. Due to these efforts, they often end up experiencing increased social isolation (Braman, 2004).

Of note is that, while incarceration brings with it challenges for female partners of incarcerated men, it also provides female partners with the opportunity to become financially independent, shoulder traditionally masculine tasks within the household, and enjoy decision making power over the household and become assertive (Moerings, 1992). Often, for the first time, women seek formal employment, and enjoy financial security on their own (Harman et al., 2007). Navigating the carceral institution requires them to be assertive, and the experience of standing up for themselves during their interactions with prison officials can do wonders in enhancing their confidence (Kotova, 2018). As a result, the adverse event of spousal incarceration can almost have a transformational impact on the lives of women, by increasing their sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency (Kotova, 2018). In such a scenario, the impending release of incarcerated partners may bring up mixed emotions, as while women may be excited to be reunited with their partners, they may be equally fearful of losing this newfound independence and being relegated to their previous subservient position in the household (e.g., Fishman, 1990).

### *Women's Relationships with Incarcerated Partners*

In addition to exploring the experiences and well-being of women who have experienced spousal incarceration, researchers have focused on the quality of intimate partner relationships when a partner is incarcerated. Overall, findings suggest that distance from an incarcerated partner does not have a straightforward impact on relationship quality. On the one hand, separation from an incarcerated partner generally strains the marital relationship; distance due to incarceration causes non-incarcerated female partners to feel alone, yearn to be reunited with their partners, and experience unfulfillment of sexual desires (De Claire et al., 2020; Harman et al., 2007). On the other hand, non-incarcerated female partners report idealizing their romantic partners as the incarcerated partners communicate sensitively through letters, expressing their emotions in ways they had never done previously (Comfort, 2008). Female partners also build certain hopes for the future, including a belief that their incarcerated partners will change their behavior and not engage in a life of crime (De Claire et al., 2020). Perhaps for this reason, relationship quality has been found to differ when it comes to the period of incarceration versus reentry (Dwyer Emory, 2022; La Vigne et al., 2005; Mowen & Visher, 2016; Turney, 2015). For instance, in one study, current paternal incarceration was positively associated with mother-reported relationship quality, but recent paternal incarceration (within the past two years) was associated with lower relationship quality, greater physical abuse, and reduced experience of support for female partners of incarcerated men (Turney, 2015).

Several factors including pre-incarceration relationship quality, maintenance of contact during incarceration, enrollment of incarcerated partners in family centered class (e.g., parenting classes), and experience of physical and emotional violence interact to determine relationship quality during reentry with respect to intimate partner relationships (Dwyer Emory, 2022; La

Vigne et al., 2005; Mowen & Visser, 2016). Factors associated with positive relationship quality versus those associated with negative relationship quality may themselves be distinct (Turney, 2015). For instance, while economic strain and violence may be associated with negative relationship quality, their absence may not predict positive relationship quality (Turney, 2015). Relationship dissolution during release and reentry may be due to factors including the return of the newly released partner to the “fast life”, inability of the incarcerated partner to get used to the newfound autonomy of their female partners, and greater risk of intimate partner violence, among others (Apel, 2016; McKay et al., 2018; Oliver & Hairston, 2008; Siennick et al., 2014).

In addition to examining relationship quality and risk of dissolution, researchers have explored the processes of relationship maintenance. Studies suggest that women use varied forms of contact to maintain relationships with their incarcerated partners, which can lead to different types of communication. For instance, incarcerated men may be more likely to talk about their feelings in the form of letters, which can play an important role in maintaining intimacy between them and their spouses (Comfort et al., 2005). On the other hand, telephonic contact may become a means by which incarcerated men may monitor the daily lives of their partners in attempts to control the household from afar (Fishman, 1988a). The carceral institution regulates the maintenance of contact between incarcerated individuals and their wives/female partners. How contact can be maintained, when can it be maintained, and by whom is dictated by the carceral institution. These policies can change without notice, which itself adds an element of uncertainty and unpredictability in the lives of family members (Durante et al., 2022). Additionally, even the content of conversation, whether it is in the form of phone calls or letters, is surveilled (Comfort, 2008). In fact, whether touch is appropriate and what form of touch is allowed during in-person visits is determined by the carceral institution (Comfort, 2008). This is important to consider

because this implies that female partners cannot freely communicate with their incarcerated loved ones, on their own terms. This does not just have a bearing on their relationship but also on their own routines and well-being (Black, 2010; Comfort, 2008; Durante et al., 2022).

Furthermore, restrictions on physical touch, inconvenient and restrictive visiting hours, the placement of partners in distant prisons are barriers that can impede women's efforts to remain in touch with their partners (Hairston et al., 2004). However, female partners attempt to find their own ways to challenge and even circumvent institutional control (e.g., writing poems in letters undecipherable to the prison officials who read them) (Black, 2010).

### ***Women's Relationship with the Carceral Institution***

Indeed, as illustrated above, not only do women have a relationship with their incarcerated spouses; they also have a relationship with the carceral institution itself. Ethnographic work in this area has documented how frequent interactions with the carceral institution can cause women to become integrated into the prison culture. While their interactions with the prison system can be oppressive, the carceral institution may also act as the primary social agency that women have at their disposal, leading women to experience an ambivalent relationship with this institution.

Using her doctoral work conducted with 50 female partners at San Quentin State Prison, Comfort (2008, p.13) coined the term *secondary prisonization* to capture the ways in which female partners' engagement with the carceral institution facilitates their integration into prison culture. Through regular prison visits and phone calls with their incarcerated partners, women encounter the prison on a regular basis. Often, prison protocols dictate the sartorial choices as well as daily schedules of women, who begin to plan their lives around these rules and guidelines (Comfort, 2008). Domesticity is enacted in the prison through conjugal visits where women and

their incarcerated partners perform their marital life within the confines of the carceral institution. The prison complex becomes the site where everyday intimacy (e.g., eating together, living in the same physical space, engaging in sexual intimacy) is enjoyed, as well as where special occasions (e.g., birthday, weddings) are celebrated (Comfort, 2008). This transforms the prison into a “domestic satellite,” blurring the distinction between home and the prison (Comfort, 2008, p.103). At the same time, women experience repeated stigma in their interactions with the prison system, enduring, for instance, the moral judgments of officers in the prison complex. In her qualitative study with 30 wives of prison inmates, Fishman (1988a, p.184) found that women felt that they were judged, on the basis of their dress, demeanor, company, their own criminal records, and the conduct of their husbands, as “whores” or “good wives” by prison guards who decided whom to search for contraband, during their visits, according to these judgments.

Female partners share an ambivalent relationship with the carceral institution, which oppresses them but also helps them manage the conduct of their incarcerated partners. For instance, due to the scarcity of affordable interventions to manage their mental health needs or substance use recovery needs, the carceral institution becomes the sole resource that the most vulnerable, minoritized populations can access to deal with their addictions, mental health needs, and potential violence of their family members (Comfort, 2008). Viewing the prison system from this lens helps us understand the ways in which it functions as a social agency for the most disenfranchised members of society. However, the power that women may gain by aligning with the carceral institution (e.g., by cooperating with correctional officers, by using threats of imprisonment to keep their partner’s behavior in check) does not dilute the power of the institution itself, which continues to be the ultimate bastion of power (Comfort, 2008). In fact,

the power gained by the women is the mere byproduct of the care-work that is conveniently outsourced to them by this bastion of power.

Although research in Western countries has focused on the female partners of incarcerated men, this population remains underserved and understudied in the Indian context, which is distinctive from the developed world. Next, I turn to the Indian context to build an understanding of families of the incarcerated in India.

### **The Indian Context**

According to the 2019 Prison Statistics Report, there are 1350 prisons in India with 478,600 prison inmates and an occupancy rate of 118.5% (National Crime Records Bureau, 2020b). Convicted prison inmates consist of 30% of the prison population; the remaining 70% constitute remanded prison inmates who have not yet been convicted by any level of judiciary. Under the Indian Penal Code (IPC), the death penalty and life imprisonment are awarded for heinous crimes including homicide. Currently, as many as over half of the convicted prison inmates (53.54%) are serving life sentences (National Crime Records Bureau, 2020b). Unlike in the U.S., life imprisonment in India is usually for a duration of fourteen years (Gokhale, 2018). However, this sentence has acquired a new kind of harshness because in recent judgments, courts have stated that life imprisonment refers to its literal translation: imprisonment for the rest of the convict's natural life (Gokhale, 2018).

In India, prisons are regulated by state governments; therefore, there can be significant variation in rules across prisons, contingent upon the state in which they are situated. Uniquely in the Indian context, the parole and furlough policies grant prison inmates the opportunity to visit their families while serving their sentence. As per the current parole/furlough guidelines (Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi, 2010), an inmate is eligible for parole after

servicing one year of the awarded prison sentence, and furlough is applicable for sentences longer than five years. Prison inmates become eligible for furlough after serving three years of their sentence. Inmates are allowed 91 days of furlough in a year, and time spent with the family during furlough is counted towards the inmates' sentence.

### **Families of The Incarcerated in India**

In the Indian context, families of the incarcerated have received inadequate scholarly attention. Even when families of incarcerated persons are investigated, like in the U.S., child well-being is often the primary focus. For example, scholarship in India has examined young children's experiences with maternal incarceration (e.g., Bhandari, 2016). This is likely to be the result of the widespread Indian institutional practice that allows children up to the age of six to cohabit with their mothers during their imprisonment (Sukhramani & Gupta, 2020).

Chakrabarti (1989) published the solitary academic article which describes the socio-demographic profiles of the wives of the incarcerated. Findings based on 467 wives of incarcerated men revealed that many (56%) were illiterate and most (87%) had never experienced employment before spousal incarceration. The involuntary removal of the only income generating member from the family forced a majority of women (63%) to seek employment. With respect to women who were employed, as few as three women held skilled jobs; most women worked casual labor jobs, due to not possessing the requisite education and skills. As many as more than half the participants (57%) reported that their expenditure exceeded their income, and they had to beg and borrow money to fulfill their subsistence needs. As many as 85% of the 467 women experienced physical and mental health difficulties. Furthermore, they reported limited practical or emotional support; spousal incarceration was associated with a significant decline in the support wives received from neighbors and relatives. These findings

need to be understood in the context of the various forms of marginalization that are prevalent in Indian society, as presented in the following section.

### **Multiple Sources of Marginalization**

Wives of incarcerated men are marginalized due to interwoven hierarchies of stratification, namely, the marginalization that accompanies their gender identity, their socio-economic status, their caste identity, their religious identity, and their association with their incarcerated partners. Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) articulation of intersectionality helps in understanding these interlocking systems of stratification. Crenshaw coined the term *intersectionality* to point to ways in which oppression along the lines of race and gender simultaneously construct the marginalization experienced by Black women (Crenshaw, 1989). Thus, intersectionality refers to ways in which individuals simultaneously inhabit many social locations, and these social locations intersect with one another to determine the privilege and/or marginalization that is experienced by them (Few-Demo, 2014).

While membership in multiple marginalized groups compounds risk, intersectionality goes beyond considering the multiplicative risk that comes from marginalized identities by also centering the experience of inequality across and within these groups. A core tenant of intersectionality is that oppression and inequality “co-create and substantiate” each other (Buchanan & Wiklund, 2021, p.26), an idea that is highly applicable to Indian women on the margins who are interfacing with the criminal justice system. In the following section, guided by an intersectional feminist lens and Chakrabarti's (1989) description of women's cumulative disadvantage, I discuss several types of marginalization that wives of the incarcerated in India are likely to encounter.

#### ***Economic Vulnerability***

Most inmates and their families in India fall within the lowest socioeconomic bracket. In 2019, four-in-five convicted prison inmates (80.3%) had not completed their high school education and over one-third (34.4%) were illiterate (National Crime Records Bureau, 2020b). Given the financial decline that often accompanies paternal incarceration (Western & Wildeman, 2009), wives of the incarcerated may be forced to seek outside employment. Gender inequalities contribute to women oftentimes being employed within the informal sector across developing countries (Sheikh & Gaurav, 2020). As a result of cultural norms which constrain women's upward mobility, women have limited opportunities to obtain education or professional skills (Batra & Reio, 2016). This, in turn, makes them unsuitable for employment within the formal sector; more than 90% women are employed within the informal sector in India with less than 1 in 5 women engaged in formal work (Kulkarni & Chouhan, 2023; Stuart et al., 2018). Female earnings have been found to be merely 70% of male earnings in the urban areas (Survey Design and Research Division, 2018–2019). This is also consistent with *feminization of labor* or the disproportionately high employment of women in informal, low-skilled to unskilled work in low-income countries, which exposes them to poor conditions of work and low incomes (Akorsu, 2016).

A third of the female workers in India are engaged in home-based work (Stuart et al., 2018). Home-based workers produce goods and services for sale in global and/or domestic markets. The income generated from home-based work is often on a per piece basis, with respect to goods produced, often at appallingly low rates. For instance, home-based workers may roll incense sticks for a living. These home-based workers often earn a meager Rs. 2.5 (\$0.03) for every Rs. 100 (\$1.32) that end users pay for the incense sticks (Mehrotra & Biggeri, 2007). Home-based workers, who are amongst the most vulnerable employees of the informal sector,

encounter numerous hardships such as low incomes, no job security, challenging conditions of work, absence of social security, and lack of sanitation and basic infrastructure in the neighborhoods they inhabit (Stuart et al., 2018). Wives of incarcerated men may be forced to turn to home-based work in times of need. In an unpublished report, Sukhramani et al., (2019) found that nearly one-in-five (19.56%) primary caregivers with an incarcerated family member (75% of which were wives of incarcerated men) was engaged in home-based work, which provided them with a monthly income of Rs. 1500-Rs. 3000 (\$21 to \$41). In short, wives of incarcerated men are disproportionately impacted by meager employment prospects, contributing to their economic vulnerability.

### ***Single Motherhood***

In India, there are 13 million single mother households which comprise of lone mothers living alone with their children. These make up 12.5% of all households in India (UN Women, 2019). It is important to note that this figure was computed by considering all households in which lone mothers lived with their children, either alone or with extended families, without the father of their children. In India, women headed households form the bulk of poor households contributing to *feminization of poverty* (Bessell, 2015). The poverty rate for single-mother households in India is 38%, compared to 22.6% for dual-parent households (UN Women, 2019). In addition to the economic vulnerability of single motherhood, single mothers also must face the stigma that accompanies widowhood or divorce or having their husbands in prison. Caste based marriages facilitate the maintenance of the caste system in India and act as a tool for controlling women's sexuality (Chakravarti & Krishnaraj, 2018). As a result, marriage is nearly universal and viewed as compulsory in the Indian context (Banerjee & Deshpande, 2023). Thus, single mothers tend to be viewed negatively by the Indian society and experience social isolation

(Bharat, 1986). In fact, divorce is very uncommon in India, in large part because of the associated stigma (Thadatil & Sriram, 2020). Even single mothers who are widowed are considered inauspicious and are accorded reduced social status (Mohindra et al., 2012). Women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have been found to face the worst economic and social repercussions of single motherhood (Mehta, 1975). Sukhramani et al. (2019) found instances where wives of incarcerated men, who lived by themselves, were subject to neighborhood gossip and ridicule due to the absence of their husbands.

Single mothers are prone to emotional vulnerability. Studies suggest that they experience feelings of loneliness, shame, guilt, anger, loss of self-confidence, anxiety about their future, restlessness, insomnia, and more (Bharat, 1986; Kotwal & Prabhakar, 2009). Sometimes, the grief of losing their relationship can be so intense that it manifests in suicidality (Bharat, 1986). Spousal incarceration is likely to compound the emotional impacts of single motherhood due to the social invalidation associated with the loss (Arditti, 2012). For example, Sukhramani et al. (2019) found that wives of incarcerated men experienced prolonged grief due to spousal separation, which had long lasting repercussions for their physical and mental health, including chronic grief, sadness, bodily pains, loss of appetite and sleep, and feelings of suicidality.

### ***Being Scheduled Caste***

In the Indian context, the caste system structures social stratification and is an important determinant of social mobility. In terms of caste identity, individuals can belong to general castes, Other Backward Classes (OBCs), Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Lancet, 2014). These caste identities are ordered hierarchically such that each rung lower in the ladder is associated with more social disadvantage. The Scheduled Castes, also called 'Dalits', are at the lowest rung of this hierarchy, and are often positioned outside the caste system, with notions of

impurity driving the grave discrimination they encounter (Khubchandani et al., 2017). This includes being denied access to community resources including water, experiencing caste-based violence, being denied medical care, and so on (Naval, 2004; Thomas et al., 2013). This caste category comprises the poorest of poor, who have no assets or property and have low levels of literacy (Raghvendra, 2020).

Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe (India's indigenous populations) and OBCs (a lower caste group that is located between the Dalits and forward castes, which form the fourth category within the caste system) are overrepresented amongst undertrial prison inmates (Chandra & Medarametla, 2017) and convicted inmates (Ram & Kumar, 2021). In fact, as many as 1 in 4 incarcerated individuals have been reported to be Dalits (Soundararajan, 2022). The percentage of imprisoned Scheduled Caste individuals has increased over time, suggesting that wives of incarcerated men are increasingly likely to be Scheduled Castes themselves (Ram & Kumar, 2021). In the study conducted by Sukhramani et al. (2019), 40% of the families of incarcerated men belonged to the Scheduled Caste category, and 17% belonged to the Other Backward Classes (OBCs).

Dalit women endure the burden of the triple marginalization due to their caste, gender, and class identities. They have a literacy rate of 56.5%, in comparison to the overall literacy rate of 73% for the Indian population, a literacy rate of 64.6% for all women in India, and a literacy rate of 66.1% for all Dalits (Census Report, 2011). Additionally, Dalit women experience poorer health outcomes and worse economic deprivation than women from other castes or Dalit men (Mandal, 2013). Dalit women are likely to have exploitative, low income, and unsanitary jobs that make them vulnerable to worse health outcomes. They work as 'manual scavengers' and are responsible for removing excreta from dry latrines (Mangubhai & Capraro, 2015). Their multiple

marginalized social locations also make Dalit women prone to sexual exploitation. Upper caste men may rape Dalit women to assert their position in the caste hierarchy (Grey, 2005), effectively transforming Dalit women's bodies into sites of violence. In recent times, violence against Dalit women has risen. For instance, from 2015 to 2019, there was a 49.87% increase in the rape committed against Dalit women (National Crime Records Bureau, 2020a).

This experience of multiple marginalization is likely to be worsened due to spousal incarceration. For example, incarceration likely makes them more vulnerable to sexual exploitation because of being perceived as 'available' or 'lonely'. The economic costs of incarceration are likely to compound the pre-existing financial disadvantage experienced by these women. The social stigmatization they experience due to being Dalit is likely to be exacerbated by the stigma of spousal incarceration. Additionally, their caste identity may compound their difficulties in navigating the carceral institution. For instance, Dalit populations are often barred from entering police stations, their complaints often go unregistered, and they are regularly mistreated by law enforcement (Mandal, 2012).

### ***Being Muslim***

A historical legacy of discrimination against Islam makes Muslims a vulnerable population in India. Their vulnerability has increased under the current political regime. Since the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) formed the Central Government in 2014, India has witnessed the rise of Hindu nationalism, and a corresponding rise in anti-Muslim rhetoric (Ansari & Chambers, 2022). Under the two electoral terms of the BJP Government, India has transformed into a right-wing nation state, one which is not accommodating of its minorities, particularly Muslims (Kaur, 2020), who are the largest minority group and constitute 14% of the overall population (Allarahamali et al., 2022). Additionally, the current political climate has contributed to such an

increase in violence and hate crimes against Muslims in India that human rights activists are concerned about the situation becoming genocidal (Werleman, 2021).

The double burden of being women and being Muslim puts Muslim women in a precarious position. For instance, Muslim women exhibit poor health outcomes, including greater prevalence of malnutrition in comparison to the general Indian population (Dubey, 2016). While the literacy rate among Muslims is lower than that among other groups, it is even lower for Muslim women. A staggering 48% of Muslim women are completely illiterate (Allarahamali et al., 2022). Such low levels of literacy along with restrictions on mobility (Chakraborty & Chatterjee, 2021) contribute to limited employment opportunities in the formal sector for Muslim women, leading to their engagement in low paying home-based work. Further, the vulnerability of Muslim women worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic due to prejudicial beliefs that Muslims were associated with the spread of the virus (Desai et al., 2021). In fact, the probability of Muslim women's employment reduced to from .23 to .09 for Muslim women in Delhi in 2020 (Desai et al., 2021).

With respect to incarceration, Muslims are overrepresented in the population of convicts (Ram & Kumar, 2021) as well as undertrials (Chandra & Medarametla, 2017), and the proportion of Muslims inmates in India has increased over time – from 11.6% in 1998, to 19.1% in 2018 (Ram & Kumar, 2021). In Sukhramani et al.'s (2019) study, 36% of the families of incarcerated men were Muslim. Due to patterns of homogeneity in the social locations of incarcerated men and their intimate partners (cf. Western & Pettit, 2010), it is likely that wives of incarcerated Muslim men are Muslim women. This means that they are likely to face the triple stigma of being Muslim, being women, and being associated with their incarcerated partners. This, in turn, is likely to exacerbate their socioeconomic vulnerability.

In sum, wives of the incarcerated are a vulnerable and underserved population. Their occupation of multiple stigmatized social locations increases their susceptibility to poor physical and mental health outcomes. The material disadvantage that incarceration brings with itself further adds to their precarity. While the lived realities of this population have not been examined in the Indian context, the connections that can be drawn from various other bodies of literature point to the likelihood of the operation of simultaneous, interlocking forms of oppression. With an understanding of the literature on women experiencing spousal incarceration as well as the Indian context, I turn now to a discussion of the theoretical frameworks that informed and guided my study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The present research study used an integrated theoretical framework that brought together intersectional feminism, Dalit feminist thought and symbolic interactionism. Intersectional feminism was used as the primary lens for examining the lived realities of wives of incarcerated men in India. Using this critical theoretical framework helps in examining small and big ways in which power is negotiated by women in their familial, spousal, and societal interactions. Doing so is instrumental in building an understanding of the role of power in the ways in which women negotiate their identity as wives of incarcerated men. Symbolic interactionism is a social constructivist theoretical perspective that focuses on ways in which meanings are produced in social interactions. Using this theoretical framework enables the examination of meaning-making processes, allowing for a deeper understanding of the ways in which wives of incarcerated men perceive their trajectories.

## **Intersectional Feminism and Dalit Feminist Thought**

Intersectional feminism emphasizes the embeddedness of individuals within broader social structures (Crenshaw, 1989). As a result, it offers a useful lens for understanding how lived realities of wives of incarcerated men in India are simultaneously co-constructed through the interaction of different social identities including their caste identity, their gender identity, and their religious identity. This perspective sensitizes us to the ways in which power operates within the institutional structures that wives of incarcerated men navigate, including the carceral institution. By viewing individuals as agentic beings who act to reduce or reproduce systemic oppression, intersectional feminism is helpful in bringing into focus the varied ways in which women actively engage with their lived realities, and in recognizing their often-unacknowledged heroic efforts to survive their difficult circumstances (Allen & Henderson, 2022). Such framing is instrumental in conducting social justice-informed research which foregrounds the voices of participants in the pursuit of advancing social change (Allen & Henderson, 2022).

Using intersectional feminism is suitable for conducting research in the Indian context because of the relevance of community membership in a collectivistic society like India (Menon, 2015). For instance, the Indian anti-imperialist struggle of the early twentieth century, which was inextricably linked to the recognition of inhabiting multiple community identities instead of an individual-first idea of citizenship, was repeatedly reiterated by nationalist leaders like Ambedkar and Gandhi. Using the framework of intersectionality implies casting attention to ways in which the category of 'woman' in the Indian context is complicated by the community identities tied to caste, class, religion, and so on. For instance, while the workforce participation rate for Indian women is as low as 9.2%, the same for Muslim women is even lower at 5.1% (Abraham et al., 2021).

However, a study of Dalit and lower caste women in the Indian context cannot be undertaken without considering the Dalit standpoint and theorizing that has been advanced by Dalit academics themselves. A Dalit feminist epistemological approach is based on the recognition that Dalit and non-Dalit women, while possibly possessing some similar life experiences as women, differ in terms of their political, cultural, historical, and social realities (Rege, 2019). It is based on the awareness that Dalit women simultaneously experience their bodies as gendered, sexualized and caste bodies (Anandhi & Kapadia, 2017). In her essay, Shailaja Paik (2021, p.127) proposes a “Dalit womanist humanist complex” which foregrounds the lived experiences of Dalit women who have often neither been considered women nor human. A “Dalit womanist humanist complex” acknowledges the unique lived realities of Dalit women as well as their theoretical contributions. This epistemological approach is suitable for the present study because it accounts for the double patriarchy that Dalit women experience due to their caste and gender identities which makes them uniquely vulnerable to sexual violence and oppression (Paik, 2021; Rege, 2019). In her choice of the word “womanist” Paik (2021, p.135) takes into consideration the work done by Black feminists. This approach is apt for framing the current study because of its nuanced understanding of the complex, multi-layered lived realities of Dalit women. For instance, Paik (2021, p.131) recognizes Dalit women as “transgressive agents” who are agentic and may be financially independent while still also being susceptible to the most extreme forms of humiliation. A Dalit feminist standpoint cautions against a binary understanding of agency or subversion and emphasizes the operation of multiple viewpoints simultaneously. This epistemological approach asks the researcher to keep an eye out for instances of agency exercised under constraints, which is termed as “contingent agency” (Paik, 2021, p.135).

Through this study, I sought to bring together a Dalit feminist epistemological position and intersectional feminism with the objective of building shared meanings that can be understood globally while also staying true to and rooted in the lived experiences of my participants. This theoretical integration is congruent with the writings of Dalit feminists like Shailaja Paik. According to Paik (2021), attending to the oppression experienced by Dalit women as a result of a complex matrix of oppression due to the interlinked categories of gender, caste, sexuality is a way non-Dalit scholars (such as myself) may be able to contribute to Dalit womanism humanism. Paik emphasizes the importance of building bridges with other marginalized groups and espouses an inclusive approach with a focus on creating solidarity and dialogue across communities.

### **Symbolic Interactionism**

Symbolic interactionism views individuals as constructors of their worlds, who actively interpret their lived realities and act toward things based on the meanings they ascribe to them (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). There are multiple reasons why this theory is suitable for guiding the current research study. First, symbolic interactionism views meanings and identities as being constructed in social interactions and places emphasis on how symbols and language play a role in meaning-making (Carter & Fuller, 2015; LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Thus, it follows that familial and social expectations play a role in the construction of one's identity. This is important with respect to the current study, as such a perspective can be instrumental in understanding ways in which the changing familial and social expectations that follow the event of incarceration has a bearing on how wives of incarcerated men perceive themselves and make meaning of their experiences. This theory focuses on how familial roles are created and defined as well as how the overarching social context influences the ways in which these roles operate

(LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Such a focus makes this theory useful for examining women's relationships within their families and the roles they occupy within their families in the context of incarceration.

Second, symbolic interactionism emphasizes the fluidity and dynamism of meaning making through one of its basic tenets: that meanings are constantly being *created and recreated* through interpretive processes in the context of social interactions (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). This is important with respect to the experiences of wives of incarcerated men because of the constantly and often rapidly changing life circumstances they encounter. Symbolic interactionism views the family as a living being that is constantly being constructed through the ways in which family members interact with and relate to one another. This sensitizes one to capture the flux that characterizes the familial context of wives of incarcerated men (Allen & Henderson, 2022).

Third, a key tenet of symbolic interactionism relevant to this study is that larger societal processes influence the lived realities of individuals (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). It posits that routine interactions in various situations of daily life help individuals make meaning of social structures (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Such a conceptualization helps establish the importance of examining the interactions of wives of the incarcerated with various formal and informal institutional structures (e.g., immediate, and extended family, carceral institution, employers, governmental schemes, nonprofits) as it is likely that these interactions are going to determine the ways in which the larger social structure is perceived by them. This is salient with respect to the lived experiences of wives of the incarcerated given the likelihood of the influence of social and cultural processes, including societal attitudes towards crime and justice involved families, on their trajectories as well as on their access to resources and opportunities.

## **Integrating Intersectional Feminism and Symbolic Interactionism**

For the purpose of the current study, a theoretical integration of intersectional feminism and symbolic interactionism was undertaken, employing intersectional feminism as an overarching lens to guide the study while drawing from specific concepts, assumptions, and premises of symbolic interactionism. The strength of intersectional feminism is its focus on the values of social justice, and transformation (Allen & Henderson, 2022). Using this perspective to anchor this study helps foreground structural inequalities and challenge normative social constructions.

Using a critical perspective in conjunction with a sociological theory was conducive to this study since it aimed to examine how power operates within the lives of wives of the incarcerated as well as their spousal and familial relationships. While symbolic interactionism has been critiqued for not giving due consideration to overarching social structures and processes like racial stratification, the social constructivist underpinning of this theoretical framework makes it suitable for incorporating a critical perspective such as intersectional feminism (Allen & Henderson, 2022). The framework of intersectionality helps focus attention on ways in which macro level social factors influence and are influenced by the social construction of individual and familial meanings. Another aspect that made these theories suitable for integration pertains to the way in which they understand human agency. Both these theoretical perspectives view individuals as agentic actors, who do not passively go through their lives but rather actively influence and are influenced by their context. Consequently, using this integrated theoretical framework helped in designing a study which views wives of incarcerated men as agentic actors who are actively involved in making meaning of their lived realities while also acknowledging

the ways in which larger societal forces constrain them and influence their meaning-making processes.

### **The Current Study**

The current study focuses on women experiencing spousal incarceration in India, with the objective of centering and amplifying the voices of women by documenting their untold stories.

The purpose of this study was to understand how Indian wives of incarcerated men make meaning of their experiences, and to provide insight into the power structures that women wrestled with in their everyday lives as wives of incarcerated men, living in a patriarchal society.

Narratives often are the cultural contexts in which people engage in making meaning of their lived experiences. Individuals make meaning of their lives through *storytelling*, or narrating their past, present, and future. Symbolic structures, including commonly held social conventions such as reciprocity, are used by individuals to produce stories (Cousineau, 2020). Stories often are told in social interactions, and social interactions become the context in which stories acquire meaning (Cousineau, 2020; Plummer, 2002). Telling and listening to stories helps individuals gain a deeper understanding of their own circumstances while also helping evolve shared meaning with others. Recognizing the importance of storying the lived experience, this qualitative study used narrative analysis to address the following research questions:

1. What themes characterize the stories of women experiencing spousal incarceration in India?
2. How do wives of incarcerated spouses in India make meaning of their experiences?

## CHAPTER 3: METHODS

In this chapter, I first discuss the research method of narrative analysis that was used for this study. Second, I provide an overview of the data collection process, including recruitment and participant selection criteria. Third, I explain the procedures that were used for data analysis. Finally, I provide my reflexivity statement and discuss the ethical concerns that surrounded this study, along with strategies used to navigate them.

### Narrative Analysis

The research question for the present study was investigated using narrative analysis. As humans, we use stories every day to express our emotions and beliefs to ourselves and the world (Fraser, 2004). It is through telling and retelling stories that we convey our identities to those around us and make meaning of our experiences (Fraser, 2004). Narrative analysis is a method that focuses on how a participant organizes events into a narrative and employs language and/or visual images to communicate meaning to the audience or the researcher (Riessman, 2008). Narrative analysis investigates the purpose and use of language in storytelling, in addition to the substantive content that is being conveyed by the participant (Riessman, 2008). Rather than focusing on uncovering “the truth,” this method is focused on the ways in which stories are used to co-construct the realities they represent (Earthy & Cronin, 2008). The goal is not necessarily to resolve conflicting interpretations but to bring forward multiple meanings and divergent interpretations. Narrative analysis is an inductive approach which engages in knowledge production by attending to the key themes inherent in participant narratives (Riessman, 2008). The recognition of personal storytelling as a valid method of knowledge production marks a departure from traditional, positivistic assumptions in social science (Earthy & Cronin, 2008; Fraser, 2004).

Narrative analysis was chosen for the current study for three central reasons. First, as an interpretive, social constructionist method, narrative analysis foregrounds voices of participants. Second, it does not just focus on the life stories of individuals, but also on the social (e.g., low-income neighborhoods, the carceral institution), familial (e.g., single-parent, sole earner), and cultural (e.g., patriarchal) contexts within which their lives are lived and formed (Czarniawska, 2004). This focus on these multiple, simultaneous overarching contexts enables a contextualized understanding of the lives of wives of incarcerated men. When employed with this marginalized population, this method lends credence to the belief that the stories of these women deserve to be privileged (Coba-Rodriguez et al., 2020).

Third, this inductive approach to data analysis aims to extract the underlying implicit and explicit meanings of narratives, in alignment with the goals of this symbolic interactionist study. Narrative analysis uses two types of interpretation to uncover implicit and explicit meanings: *hermeneutics of faith* and *hermeneutics of suspicion* (Josselson & Hammack, 2021, p.12). *Hermeneutics of faith* refers to the explicit meanings articulated by interviewees, while *hermeneutics of suspicion* refers to the deeper layers of meaning implicit in the interviewees' narratives (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). Because narrative analysis views stories as being co-constructed in the interaction between the researcher and the participant, the researcher must contend with a dual layer of interpretation, wherein the first layer of interpretation is the meaning participants make of their lives, and the second layer of interpretation is the meaning that the narrative researcher makes of the narratives of participants (Riessman, 2008).

## **Participants and Recruitment**

### ***Inclusion Criteria***

Women residing in the National Capital Territory of Delhi whose husbands were currently incarcerated or had experienced incarceration previously were included in the study. While the study had originally aimed to only include participants whose husbands were imprisoned at the time of data collection, the hidden nature of the population and challenges involved in finding participants, led the researcher to broaden the inclusion criterion to include participants who had experienced spousal incarceration previously. Thus, two participants whose spouses were undertrials, currently outside on bail, were included in the sample. Furthermore, a participant whose husband had returned from prison after serving a sentence was included.

Only participants who had at least one of the following social identities were included: a Lower Caste identity and/or a Muslim religious identity. The reason for this inclusion criterion was that these participants were likely to experience greater marginalization while also being more representative of women who are likely to experience spousal incarceration. Furthermore, only women who were in contact with their incarcerated husbands or considered themselves to still be in a relationship with their incarcerated husbands were included in the study, due to the study objective of examining women's meaning making about their continuing marital relationship with their incarcerated husbands.

### ***Recruitment***

Participants were recruited through purposeful and snowball sampling (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). Participants were identified by liaising with nonprofit organizations. Specifically, nonprofit organizations that work with women from low-income backgrounds, or with children of incarcerated parents were contacted and informed about the research study. The

organizations spread the word about the study and passed on the researcher's contact information to their beneficiaries, who often further spread the word in their neighborhoods. The goal was to interview approximately seven to 10 women, as this is considered to be an appropriate sample size for undertaking the detailed process of narrative analysis (Sandelowski 1995).

### ***Sample Description***

The sample consisted of 14 women who ranged in age from 20 to 44 years ( $M = 32.14$ ) (see Table 1). More than half of the participants ( $n = 8$ ) were Muslims; the rest identified as Hindus. While caste identity was not applicable to the Muslim participants, all the Hindu participants were lower caste. Half of the Hindu participants ( $n = 3$ ) belonged to the Scheduled Caste (SC) category while nearly half ( $n = 2$ ) belonged to the Other Backward Classes category (OBC). With respect to their educational attainment, nearly half ( $n = 6$ ) of the participants were completely illiterate. Among the participants who were literate ( $n = 8$ ), four had studied only until elementary school, and three had studied until middle school. Only one participant had completed high school.

In terms of their current employment status, three participants were unemployed. Among those who were employed ( $n = 11$ ), most of them worked within the informal economy. Four participants worked as household help, three were involved in waste work and scrap work, one worked by ironing and washing clothes of those in her neighborhood, one of them worked as a contractual construction laborer, and one worked as an assembly line worker in a factory. Finally, one participant was employed in a government childcare center.

Nearly all of the participants ( $n = 13$ ) had children, with a majority ( $n = 8$ ) of them being mothers to 3 or more children. Among the 11 participants for whom information about their indebtedness was known, nearly all of them were currently in debt ( $n = 10$ ).

More than half of the participants were married to men who were undertrials ( $n = 8$ ) and had not yet been convicted. While a few of their spouses had been involved in petty crimes including thefts, fighting and so on ( $n = 4$ ), a few of them had been incarcerated for committing homicide ( $n = 3$ ). Another crime that was reported as the reason for incarceration was sexual assault ( $n = 3$ ) as well as sexual assault of a minor ( $n = 2$ ). All the participants were in contact with their incarcerated spouses. All the participants had visited their spouses in prison, and a few of them ( $n = 6$ ) had received visits from their incarcerated spouses either in the form of parole or furlough. A substantial number of participants reported being in regular contact with their spouses through telephone calls ( $n = 9$ ).

**Table 1***Sample Characteristics*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Religion</b>	<b>Caste</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Employment Status</b>	<b>No. of Children</b>	<b>Husband's Incarceration Status</b>	<b>Nature of Husband's Crime</b>	<b>Forms of Contact w/ Husband</b>
Sunita	40	Hindu	Lower Caste	No Schooling	Construction work	3	Undertrial	Sexual assault of a minor	Visitation
Kavita	40	Hindu	OBC	No Schooling	Household help	3	Convicted	Homicide	Visitation, phone calls, home visits
Anju	38	Hindu	SC	Middle School	Anganwadi Helper	3	Convicted	Homicide	Visitation, phone calls
Priya	22	Hindu	SC	Elementary School	Unemployed	2	Convicted	Rape	Visitation, phone calls
Ria	20	Hindu	OBC	High School	Unemployed	0	Undertrial	Sexual assault of a minor	Visitation, phone calls, home visit
Shehnaaz	34	Muslim	N/A	Middle School	Washes, irons clothes	3	Convicted	Unknown to participant	Visitation, phone calls, home visits
Rita	38	Hindu	SC <sup>+</sup>	Elementary School	Household help	4	Undertrial (home on bail)	Unknown to participant	Visitation, phone calls
Shahna	24	Muslim	N/A	Elementary School	Waste-picker	2	Undertrial	Petty crimes	Visitation
Ruksar	28	Muslim	N/A	No Schooling	Waste-picker	2	Undertrial (home on bail)	Petty crimes	Visitation, phone calls
Fatima	25	Muslim	N/A	No Schooling	Waste-picker	1	Undertrial	Petty crimes	Visitation
Ayesha	23	Muslim	N/A	Middle School	Household help	1	Undertrial	Petty crimes	Visitation
Alisha	35	Muslim	N/A	No Schooling	Factory worker	3	Convicted	Rape	Visitation, phone calls, home visits
Shaina	43	Muslim	N/A	No Schooling	Household help	3	Undertrial	Rape	Visitation, phone calls, home visits
Iqra	36	Muslim	N/A	Elementary School	Unemployed	4	Convicted, released in 2018	Homicide	Visitation, phone calls, home visits

\*Petty crimes: theft, disorderly conduct, public fighting

## Data Collection

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 wives of prison inmates. I aimed to conduct two to three interviews with each participant across multiple visits, each spanning 60-90 minutes with the objective of allowing myself the time to familiarize myself with participants and facilitating richer responses (Read, 2018). However, due to participants' limited availability, most participants could only be interviewed once. The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 2.5 hours in duration ( $M = 1$  hour, 8 minutes).

Follow-up interviews were conducted with four participants for various reasons. A follow-up interview was conducted with one of the participants as she had been accompanied by her mother-in-law and sister-in-law during the first interview and I was not sure if she had been comfortable talking openly in their presence. As a result, she was requested for another interview and she was able to make time, leading to an in-person follow-up interview with the participant. Additionally, upon going through interview recordings for the purpose of transcription, I realized that caste and religion were underexplored during the interviews. Consequently, I sought follow-up interviews with participants; three participants agreed to be interviewed again. Since the participants were not available to meet in-person, these follow-up interviews were conducted telephonically and were brief, lasting approximately 10 minutes due to the participants' belief that caste and religion had played a minimal role in their experiences as wives of incarcerated men.

Criminal justice-involved families often experience marked uncertainties and constantly changing daily routines, as noted by Ellis (2021), which makes it difficult to interview them. However, I ensured that I was regularly in contact with participants, and to avoid cancellation or attrition, I reminded participants and confirmed upcoming interviews the evening prior to the day

of the scheduled interview. While most interviews were either conducted in the office of community-based organizations (if the participants were uncomfortable with inviting me to their homes) or in their homes, one participant was interviewed on her way back from a prison visit. This go-along method of interviewing was helpful in giving me a glimpse of the participant's world while also ensuring that being interviewed did not take up additional time in the participant's schedule and inconvenience her (Kusenbach, 2003).

Prior to interviewing participants, I first told them about the purpose of the study, checked for eligibility (by asking them if they belong to the lower castes (SC/ST/OBC and/or were Muslim; asking about the incarceration status of their husband and the status of their relationship with their incarcerated partner) and sought informed consent. Due to the limited literacy of the participants and given that the study was deemed to be exempt from consent procedures by the IRB, verbal consent was obtained from the participants. While 11 of the 14 participants provided consent to audio-record the interview, written notes were maintained for the three interviews where participants were not comfortable with being audio-recorded due to concerns of safety and privacy.

During the interview, participants were asked broad questions about the story of their relationship and their lives to understand what it means to be a "wife of an incarcerated man" (see Appendix A). These questions were supplemented with follow-up prompts (or "pocket questions," in the words Josselson and Hammack [2021, p.22]). For instance, a primary question was, "Tell me the story of your marriage." Pocket questions to prompt elaboration included, "How did you get married?" and, "How did you spend time together early in your marriage?"

Throughout the process of data collection, I maintained a journal to record my beliefs, nonverbal cues, impressions of the interview, settings, and the interviewee (including any

interactions that took place before or after the audio-recording took place), the ways in which my identities could have influenced the interview and any points of discomfort. Subsequent to each interview, I wrote detailed memos in my journal. Journaling enabled me to document critical field insights while also facilitating reflexive practice, thereby ensuring the methodological integrity of narrative analysis (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). At the same time, I also created a private Instagram page (see Appendix B), which was only accessible to my advisor and I, to capture and post photographs of travelling to the participants' homes and field sites and document my own thoughts in the caption on my journey back from a few interviews.

### **Data Analysis**

Recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and captured audio cues such as silences, laughter, and tone of voice, as is congruent with narrative analysis. Transcripts were translated to English, and the translation was checked for accuracy with the help of other field experts, such as academics and practitioners who work with women from low-income households in the National Capital Territory of Delhi.

Data analysis followed the systematic steps of narrative analysis set forth by Josselson and Hammack (2021). The first reading of each transcript was undertaken while also listening to the audio-recording focused on a preliminary analysis of the thematic content as well as gaining an understanding of the shape and structure of the narrative (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). This step involved annotating each transcript with initial impressions and writing an analysis memo which documented general impressions, impressions of the form of narratives and a section for reflexivity (see Appendix C for an example). Additionally, in order to generate preliminary thematic content, I engaged in line-by-line coding for each transcript using the qualitative data

analysis software, MAXQDA. The thematic codes that were generated during line-by-line coding were added to the first reading document that was maintained for each participant.

The second reading of each transcript aimed to identify key voices, including the dominant discourses and key ideologies, that appeared in the interviewees' narratives (e.g., patriarchy) (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). This step involved reading with particular attention to any master narratives, ideologies, and voices. During this reading, I looked for voices of family members, community actors and those of any other significant actors as well as influences of the overarching context. The analysis at this step included annotation of the transcripts as well as writing an analysis memo that documented any new themes that came up, a list of 'voices' that undergirded the narrative along with the messages delivered by these voices, and the analyst's (my) impressions (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). During this step, I created a table to list the voices and their messages, as well as whether these messages were contaminating, supportive, or both (see Appendix D for an example). In the table, I created a third column to identify key ideologies and master narratives. For the reflexivity memo written during the second reading, I focused on examining the degree to which I could relate to each participant. The objective of this exercise was to develop a deeper understanding of the reasons behind greater comfort with and preference for interactions with certain participants versus others. I wanted to dig deeper into my own emotional reactions to various participants.

The third reading of each transcript focused on examining ways in which the thematic content and key voices created cohesive patterns in the narratives (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). In this step, the annotations written during the first two readings were reviewed along with the transcript of each participant, with the objective of identifying larger patterns and creating storylines that fit their lives. As a part of this step, I chronologically ordered the various events

that had occurred in participant's lives and wrote their stories while ensuring that key thematic content was featured in these stories (see Appendix E for an example). This reading was helpful in reexamining the overall gestalt of each of the participants' narrative. It facilitated the elaboration of why a certain overall gestalt/structure or story type fit a particular participant's narrative.

The fourth reading of the transcripts, which marked a shift from an inductive to a deductive way of seeing, involved an engagement with theory, with the focus on dialoging the data with theory (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). For instance, with respect to the proposed study, it meant dialoging the data with symbolic interactionism as narratives began to show ways in which participants made meaning of their identities of being mothers, wives, women and so on. In the fourth step, transcripts as well as analytic memos written in the earlier three steps were examined with the objective of making connections to relevant theoretical frameworks. An analysis memo was written to document the linkages between participant narratives and theory (see Appendix F for an example) (Josselson & Hammack, 2021).

The fifth and final reading of the transcripts focused on a comparative analysis of data across transcripts (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). The purpose of this step included identifying what was unique to a particular participant's narrative versus what may be commonalities across participants. This step involved creating a table that identified themes and patterns across narratives (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). To facilitate comparisons across transcripts, I created a list of indicators, namely: Support (1: Absence to 3: Presence), Hope-Despair (1: Despair to 3: Hope), Material hardship (1: Presence to 3: Absence), Belief in incarcerated spouse's culpability (1: Belief that spouse is guilty to 3 Belief that spouse is innocent), Love for incarcerated spouse (1: No love to 3: A lot of love), Stigmatization (1: Presence to 3: Absence), Literacy (1: Illiterate

to 3: Literate), Worked before marriage (1: No or 2: Yes), Stable and consistent work (1: No to 3: Yes), Substance use of incarcerated spouse (1: Present or 2: Absent), Domestic violence (1: Present to 3: Absent), Being married off very young (1: Being married before the age of 18, 2: Married at 18 and 3: Married when above 18 years of age). Each of the participants were ranked on each of these parameters (see Appendix G for an example). On the basis of these rankings, I drew similarities between different participants' stories.

Upon doing so, in order to have a holistic understanding and comparison of participant stories, I clustered the stories into *story types*, placing stories that conveyed the same overall storyline, emotionality, and key life experiences into one cluster. This exercise culminated in the creation of three “story clusters” (see Table 2). As story clusters were created and refined, I focused on distilling the key properties and defining characteristics of each cluster. Refining the story clusters was a discursive process that took place through weekly meetings with my advisor. During these meetings, we discussed the key characteristics of each cluster. We engaged deeply with each cluster through questions that helped us clarify the properties as well as develop a shared understanding of what it meant to for a participant's story to be placed in a specific cluster. This process took place over 8-10 meetings, across a period of three months (December 2023 to February 2024).

In addition to identifying and defining story types that represented women's narratives, a secondary analytic goal was to identify larger overarching themes that span the narratives of the participants' lived experiences. Towards this analytic goal, I analyzed the coded data from MAXQDA and engaged in an iterative process of consolidating similar codes into larger thematic categories. We then examined the relationships between these thematic categories, exploring if and how categories represented different dimensions of deeper latent themes in the

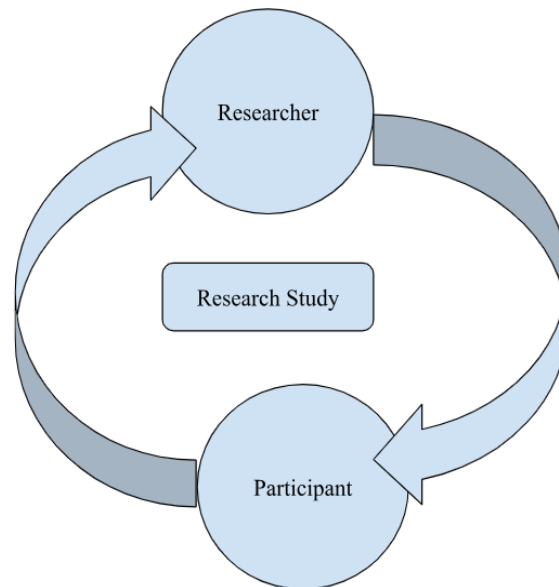
data. We sought to identify themes that were multidimensional, robust (i.e., substantially represented in the data), and that captured key elements of all participants' lived experiences. This, too, was a dialogic process facilitated by weekly meetings with my advisor, where we examined, interrogated, and analyzed the key connections and complexities between and within the themes. We further refined these themes through the clarifying processes of writing, editing, and revision.

### **Reflexivity Statement**

Daly (2007) defines reflexivity as “the ways in which a researcher critically monitors and understands the role of the self in the research endeavor” (p. 188). According to Allen (2000, 2023), qualitative researchers are themselves important instruments of research. Allen argues that candidly articulating our beliefs, apprehensions, and motivations is critical for mitigating the potential for these biases to distort or simplify our interpretations of the stories we seek. Consistent with these views, I believe that, as a researcher, I am actively (co)constructing the research process and product(s). Research is not a neutral process distant from the researcher. The person of the researcher is changed from the research just as much as the research is changed by the person of the researcher. We often talk about the person of the therapist but not enough about the person of the researcher. As someone who is a psychotherapist, who fiercely believes in the person of the therapist, I believe that the person of the researcher is just as important to the process and the product of the research. While my participants are the true stars of this research product, they have not just been influential to this study but to me just as much. Through this journey, I have learnt about myself just as much as I have learnt about the participants.

**Figure 1.**

*The intertwined influence the researcher and participant on the process and product of research*



### **The Influence of My Identity and Past Experiences in Conceptualizing this Study**

It was my involvement in a qualitative research study focused on the psychosocial health of children of incarcerated parents in India that sparked my interest in working with wives of incarcerated men. Being a part of this study led me to witness the worlds of wives of the incarcerated and witness the ways in which they navigated multiple levels of marginalization. Through this study, I was exposed to the immense financial and emotional hardship that the lives of these women are enveloped in, every single day. Interacting with them and then going back to look for scholarly literature about their experiences made me realize how little has been done to document their stories. This was the primary motivator for me to make their lived experiences the focus of this doctoral project.

My identities of being a scholar from the Global South and a feminist have played a crucial role in shaping my ideas. As a scholar from the Global South, it disappoints me to see the dearth of published literature on the experiences of wives of incarcerated men in developing

countries. While we may not be facing the challenge of mass incarceration, families of the incarcerated are still an extremely vulnerable and underserved population that deserve to be studied. In the Indian context, I have noticed that often it is the incarcerated men whose lives become the focus of most criminal justice reform work. Thus, through my research work, I wanted to focus on the voices of wives of incarcerated men and put their voices front and center, so that their stories and struggles get visibility.

### **An Emotional Journey**

I believe that this study was affected by my own attitude going in to this study as well as my attitude at each step of this study. I went into this study with a genuine curiosity to know more about the participants' intimate, interpersonal, and intrapersonal trajectories. I thought that I would operate as a collector of stories and experience gratitude towards the participants for giving me the privilege to witness their life stories and giving me permission to steal a glimpse of their inner world. While I was and will always continue to be immensely grateful to my participants for trusting me with their stories, gratitude was not the only emotion I experienced as I undertook this journey. I experienced anger, joy, hurt, sadness, irritability, disillusionment, disappointment, and everything in between.

During the process of data collection, there were moments where I had an almost visceral experience, of fear or disgust. For instance, reading/hearing about a participant's electrocution or the instance where a participant narrated the incident during which she experienced third degree burns was jarring because I could almost imagine these experiences. Visualizing such experiences was as unsettling as it was frightening. At the same time, I am also ashamed to admit that thinking about a participant's skin condition evoked disgust in my mind and I had to remind myself to put it aside and not let my prejudice get in the way of the interaction.

This study was an emotional experience not just for me, but for my participants too. Most of the women I spoke to, broke down in front of me while recounting the most painful moments of their lives. During such moments, I tried to hold space for them, without rushing them to stop crying. My training as a psychotherapist came handy in helping me put aside my own discomfort with their distress and instead just letting them feel their distress however they needed. Yet, these moments made me wonder if I was just exploiting the emotions of these women, using their struggles to earn a degree.

### **Grappling with Biases, Prejudices and Liking Some Participants More Than Others...**

Prior to interacting with participants, I thought that I would have a warm and positive attitude towards each of the women who would agree to speak with me. Yet, soon I realized that that was not the case as I did not end up feeling equally warm and compassionate towards each of the participants and there were participants, I liked more than others. I felt angry at some participants for not standing up for themselves, for not doing better for themselves. My own prejudice against passivity stoked feelings of dislike towards any participant who I perceived as being passive, making it difficult for me to be truly empathetic. At the same time, participants who I perceived as being agentic and proactive, were instantaneously more likeable for me. This made me realize just how much I have personally bought into the ideology of capitalism and individual responsibility. I believe that my internalized capitalism, made me put the onus on the women themselves to resist systemic oppression instead of holding the systems accountable for the oppression they were experiencing. While I tried to hold these prejudices aside when interacting with participants, it is possible that some of these judgements may have slipped through the cracks, particularly during the process of analysis.

The participants who were disillusioned with the world were the most difficult for me to speak with. Their hopelessness and utter lack of faith in the world was quite heartbreaking to witness. During such interviews I felt very helpless. I felt driven to find a way to make the participant feel better about the world as the optimist in me finds it very difficult to make peace with others' disillusionment. While I realized that such a reaction was unsuitable as I could not change anyone's reality or invalidate their worldview, I knew that such a reaction was driven by my own savior complex and my own need to find reasons to be hopeful.

The process of analysis and interviewing made me conscious of my own 'black and white' way of thinking whereby I saw participants either as embodying victimhood or agency, as being hopeful or disillusioned. For me, the participants who did not perceive themselves as victims, were hopeful, were easier to like, those who viewed themselves as agentic were easier to talk to. Through this study I realized that all the women were neither just victims nor purely agentic. They were neither completely hopeless nor full of hope. Most participants fit both these seemingly opposed continuums in one way or the other. By interacting with these women, I learnt that people do not exist in boxes, nothing is purely black or white, most people exist in the in-betweens, in the greys.

These interviews also made me face my own biases of whose distress is dire enough to warrant claiming victimhood. While I was uncomfortable talking to participants who saw themselves or portrayed themselves as victims, I found myself not feeling so uncomfortable while talking to one of the participants (Shehnaaz), when she perceived herself as a victim. With this participant, I felt engulfed by her sorrow, particularly while replaying the audio recording. Unlike other audio recordings, this audio recording did not make me feel annoyed or irritated at the participant's constant portrayal of herself as the victim. I wonder if that could be the result of

somewhat believing or feeling that the participant's distress was grave enough to warrant her victimhood. This realization was disturbing for me as I know that it is unfair to believe that a participant's distress is more justified than others. However, I do believe that this reaction could be the result of having a longstanding connection with this participant due to having interviewed her previously for another research project.

My own prejudice against a relational sense of self, and my internalized glorification of individualism and individuality, due to my bad experiences with a joint family setup while growing up, were brought to the forefront through this study. I found it difficult to understand or relate to my participants' relational identities and their prioritization of their families over their own selves. Yet, this study made me realize that in some instances joint families had acted as tremendous sources of support, as big networks of care. This forced me to open myself to the idea that every joint family was not necessarily harmful, constraining and all bad.

My attitude towards patriarchy affected how I perceived my participants. My anger towards patriarchy due to always having felt like a second-class citizen as a woman, often translated into feeling angry at participants' spouses each time I perceived them as being controlling. Sometimes, this even translated into feeling angry towards participants because of their decision to stay in marriages that I thought were not good for them. Their decisions to continue to make such marriages work made me feel suffocated and angry on their behalf. I desperately wanted to get them to see the light and could not understand how they could do this to themselves. This was quite disillusioning and jarring. In such instances, I felt relieved that their husbands were incarcerated. However, sometimes the participants' own desires to have their husbands back made me feel like I wish I could convince them to run away from such marriages. This often took the form of asking questions framed in multitude of ways, about

participants' marriages. And receiving responses whereby the participants restated their commitment to their marriages and their inability to leave their spouses.

A few participant's notions of morality and righteousness really stuck out to me. Their belief that elders should be respected, and that family is very everything did not sit well with me because it felt like such a key piece to their indoctrination in the patriarchal system of beliefs. I kept wanting them to challenge these ideas and yet realized that these beliefs were fundamental to who they were as people and perhaps to their entire selfhood. There were so many moments where I was impressed and yet a little taken aback by their strong notions of morality and righteousness.

### **Wrestling with My Privilege**

This study led me to confront the varied forms of privilege I have access to, which I was not so starkly aware of previously. First, I was forced to really wrestle with my class privilege. The gulf between participants' socioeconomic status and my socioeconomic status was so huge and so striking to me that it made me uncomfortable. Their constant reiteration of their illiteracy and financial plight made me feel ill at ease. The fact that they knew that they had lived such a difficult, socioeconomically marginalized life and would die this way, was quite unsettling to me. It brought forth existential discomfort as I tried to imagine myself in their place. That they had somehow resigned to their fate and made peace with their circumstances was unfathomable to me because of how often I am struck by existential angst. Yet this further brought our differential SES to my attention because I realized that even being able to think about existential questions or even experience existential angst is a privilege that someone who works relentlessly to be able to eat two meals a day does not have.

Throughout the process of data collection and analysis I was forced to confront my own idealization of work and what it can mean to someone. My identity as a working professional is core to my being and has been very fundamental to the way I view myself. It has been a source of freedom and agency. While conceptualizing and thinking about this study, I had mistakenly assumed that I would hear this sentiment being echoed by my participants. I was expecting to find stories of emancipation through foray into work. However, this journey forced me to recognize that work can be a source of exploitation rather than emancipation. It made me realize that I had always conceived and thought about work through the vantage point of an educated woman who has access to formal work, which comes with security and benefits.

While conceptualizing the study, I had not realized the ways in which my class privilege had shaped my questions and concepts. For instance, my understanding of ‘support’ was challenged throughout this study as emotional support did not register with most participants as support, due to their grave material deprivation. This made me feel irritated as I wanted participants to see merit in receiving emotional support from people. However, I recognized that such an understanding came from my own privilege of being able to focus on emotional support since I had never experienced material hardship in my life.

Second, asking questions about caste and religion made me feel ‘icky’ and ‘strange’. It felt as if asking these questions meant that I was discriminating against the participants in some way or asking something that I should not be asking. During these conversations I felt hyper aware of my caste and religious privilege. I felt that by asking these questions I was somehow ‘othering’ them and making them aware of how different they were, though my participants did not experience it this way at all. At the same time each time there was silence after I asked such a question, I felt the need to explain why I was asking a certain question. Every time I even said

‘Muslim’ or ‘Lower Caste’, I felt on the edge, like I was walking on eggshells. I felt like I was assuming a certain experience of an identity, which, of course since it is not my identity, I have no experience of inhabiting/living. This gave me a lot of food for thought about my own baggage and discomfort in having these conversations. The conversations about caste and religion made me reflect upon the difference between my own lens and the lens of the women I interviewed. The luxury of time, that I had in listening to these conversations over and over again (throughout the process of analysis) and thinking about caste and access versus their lived experiences where they did not have any time to mull over their marginalization but had to continue living and surviving, was quite prominent. I realized that by keeping participants busy in the business of surviving, the powerful systems of marginalization did not leave them with time to think, let alone fight to change the conditions of their existence.

### **Questioning My Motives and Skills**

There were times when I felt that I was trying to push the participants to give responses that were favorable, that reflected an understanding that I wanted them to have. For instance, I wanted a few participants to say that not having the freedom to go out was oppressive or that being able to make household decisions was liberating. I believe that I asked leading questions more often in cases whereby I felt that the participant was unable to understand my question, so as to simplify the process of being interviewed for such a participant. In such moments, my assumptions about participants’ competence, intelligence and understanding led me to infantilize the participants. I do believe that this was just unfair to the participants and could have definitely led to briefer responses that were not authentic to the participants. At the same time, such moments lead me to question my skills as an interviewer and a qualitative researcher who may not have as much of an open, curious mind as she would like to believe.

Throughout the study and particularly during the multiple rounds of analysis, I kept feeling like a broken record, constantly spotting patriarchal thoughts and beliefs in everything. I felt bored and irritated with myself. I wonder if I was only looking for certain ideas that validated my core beliefs. This would have led to losing out on things that did not fit my own belief systems, thereby producing a research product that is heavily influenced by my own subjectivity. As a qualitative researcher I understand that my subjectivity is fundamental to the research process and outcomes. However, the subjectivity of my participants is just as important if not more. In order to be informed by my previous experience but not limited by it, I regularly and consistently documented my thoughts in a journal (Daly, 2007). At the same time, I was conscious of the fact that as a qualitative researcher, I was actively involved in the process of constructing knowledge (Allen, 2000; 2023). I was attuned to the means by which my social locations interacted with those of my participants. As a qualitative researcher, I was cognizant of the pre-existing hierarchy between I, the researcher, and the women who were the participants of this study. I tried to explicitly acknowledge this hierarchy in my interactions with participants (Daly, 2007). Another critical practice was to consciously reflect upon and articulate the values that informed my academic pursuits. I explicitly acknowledged the role played by own perspectives in each step of my doctoral work, as recommended by Allen (2000). Finally, engaging in reflexive practice meant regularly checking in with myself to ensure that this process was not taking an emotional toll on me. I sincerely hope that these practices of being conscious, reflexive, and critical at every step of this study to consciously articulate my own biases and baggage, were able to prevent my own baggage and biases from coloring participants' perspectives and lived experiences.

### **Small Joys with Bags of Disillusionment and an Icky Savior Complex**

There were some moments of joy and some moments of hope during this entire process. One such moment was each time a participant felt seen and each time a participant talked about the cathartic experience of being interviewed. When participants told me that these interviews made them feel that their stories mattered, I felt good. This just goes to highlight just how so little goes such a long way. I felt happy on hearing participants' stories about fulfilling and loving relationships even though that happiness was often accompanied by sadness for their separation from their partners.

At lots of moments my savior complex was triggered. I found myself wanting to save the participants and then felt icky about feeling that way; the inherent assumption of superiority in that feeling was sickening to me. At the same time, not being able to help most of my participants made me feel helpless. I tried to help them by connecting them with donors, by trying to find contacts of pro bono lawyers and by getting nonprofit organizations to provide them with financial support for their needs. Yet, I was barely able to help. Being unable to really improve their circumstances, I felt horrible, guilty, and ashamed. A few participants even reinforced these feelings by letting me know that speaking to me had not improved their situation in any way. Such experiences made me wish I had the money to be able to help these women. I wish I had the skills and networks to be able to help those participants whose husbands were wrongfully incarcerated. These experiences were a big albeit unpleasant reality check of my own limitations. Throughout the study, particularly during the process of data collection and later when I was listening back to the interviews and reading the transcripts, I felt like a failure, as I mistakenly built a very idealistic notion of what this study would be able to do. Neither was I able to come up with any "path breaking" insights, nor was I able to really help the participants.

At the same time, through this study, I was able to experience moments of camaraderie and bonhomie with women who opened up to me and made me feel comfortable in their homes. I was able to laugh with them and experience their world even if just for an hour or two. Sometimes, the women felt comfortable enough to show me photographs of their families or even made me talk to their husbands. For instance, a participant's husband called while I was wrapping up the conversation with her. She told me to sit silently and listen in on her phone call as she put the phone on speaker. I felt deeply privileged to be invited to overhear this conversation, which was deeply sentimental, intimate, and private. Such gestures which came out of participants' desire to make me see their world, so that I could understand their strife, were very special. Such moments were priceless, and I will always cherish them.

### **Ethical Concerns**

There were numerous ethical concerns that I anticipated as well as encountered in the process of conducting this study. An important ethical concern revolved around the safety of participants. Given their involvement with the criminal justice system and the stigmatization they faced, ensuring that participation in this study did not compromise their privacy or safety was critical. I ensured that did not happen by offering to meet them at places of their choosing. I attempted to ensure that the venues we chose for conducting interviews were private. I ensured that when I visited the homes of participants, I received detailed directions from participants so that I did not have to ask individuals in their neighborhood, as doing so could bring unwarranted attention to the family.

A second important ethical concern was undertaking research with an underserved population with little exposure to research. Due to the absence of interventions, participants often assumed that participation in this study would help them access interventions. To navigate this

ethical concern, I clearly and repeatedly conveyed the purpose of the study and clarified my role as a researcher and the motives underlying this study (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009). Time and again, I reiterated the right of participants to withdraw from the study whenever they wanted. Furthermore, I made efforts to link participants to nonprofits and individual donors as well as lawyers who offered pro bono legal support. In some situations when it was not possible to link them with a system of support, I transparently conveyed that to participants and patiently received their criticism and disappointment.

A third ethical concern related to conducting research with a population with limited literacy. In order to manage this ethical concern, the informed consent form was written in simple, conversational Hindi, which was verified by researchers who had conducted research studies with similar populations. This informed consent form was read out to participants as many times as needed and participants had opportunities to ask questions. Their understanding of the consent form was checked by asking them open-ended questions (Wynn & Israel, 2018). Participants provided verbal consent as the present study was exempted from consent processes by the IRB. Furthermore, participants were not asked to sign consent forms as it was anticipated that they may not be able to or would not want to sign the consent form (Wyn & Israel, 2018).

Finally, a fourth ethical concern related to conducting research on a topic that is very personal and could be a source of emotional distress. This ethical concern was addressed by reminding participants that they did not have to answer any questions that they did not wish to answer. I kept checking-in with the participants to make sure that the conversation was not becoming uncomfortable for them. If the conversation/interview did become distressing or overwhelming for the participants, I reminded participants that they could take a break, reschedule the conversation for another day, or discontinue their involvement in the study (Orb

et al., 2001). Throughout the research study, I prioritized the well-being of my participants over my research agenda. I ensured that interviews did not end with a distressing question. Finally, I ensured that participants had the space to share and express their emotions and held space for their distress.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The results are organized into two sections. First, I identify and define the types of stories that represented women's narratives, or what I call *story clusters*. The purpose of story clusters is to provide a holistic understanding of the "arcs" of women's life stories, such that stories that convey the same overall storyline are presented in one cluster. In the second section, I identify larger overarching themes that span participants' lived experiences *across* story clusters, paying particular attention to how women's day-to-day lives are shaped by intersecting systems of privilege and oppression, particularly those tied to gender and class.

### Story Clusters

I organize participants' narratives into three distinct clusters, based on similarities in their lived experiences: *Ambivalent but Hanging On* (Cluster A), *Unconditionally Devoted* (Cluster B), and *Independent and Disillusioned* (Cluster C) (see Table 2). The story clusters intend to provide textured insight into the worlds and narratives of women with incarcerated husbands in India. Each cluster begins with the story of a participant from the specific cluster. Thereafter, the key features that define and characterize the specific cluster are described.

#### Cluster A: Ambivalent but Hanging On

##### *Ruksar's Story*

Ruksar, a 28-year-old Muslim mother of two, grew up with the aspiration of being married to a man who treated her with respect and provided for her. She wanted to be married into a loving family. When Ruksar was 18 years old, she fell in love with a man in her neighborhood who pursued her, and she married him against the wishes of her family. While it took a year for their families to accept the marriage, in the beginning their marriage was a good one. Her husband would provide for her and take care of her.

**Table 2***Story Cluster Summary Table*

<b>Story Cluster</b>	<b>Cluster Summary</b>	<b>Stories Represented</b>
Cluster A: Ambivalent but Hanging On	<p>Women in Cluster A had marriages that started off strong but that devolved when their husbands became involved in “the fast life” and developed substance addictions. Their husbands were repeat offenders arrested for petty crimes. While imprisoned, which brought periods of sobriety, their husbands would become loving spouses who promised to do better when they were released. But upon being released, their old habits would resume. Wives cycled through the complex emotions of longing, love, hope, disappointment, and heartbreak. They demonstrated high ambivalence but had not given up on the possibility of a better future with their spouses.</p>	Shahna, Ruksar, Fatima, Ayesha
Cluster B: Unconditionally Devoted	<p>Women in Cluster B were deeply devoted to their marriages out of an enduring love for their husbands. They described their husbands as reliable, caring, and supportive men, and they staunchly believed in their husbands’ innocence. They experienced their husbands’ incarceration as a heartbreak due to the involuntary separation from their lovers. They maintained their intimacy with their husbands through daily phone calls. Their belief in a loving reunion with their husbands in the future not only strengthened their marital relationships in the present, but also helped them endure the financial, emotional, and social hardships that accompanied this involuntary separation.</p>	Anju, Priya, Ria, Shehnaaz, Rita, Shaina
Cluster C: Independent and Disillusioned	<p>Women in Cluster C had experienced severe hardships (e.g., violence) within their marriages and had chosen to stay in their loveless marriages due to cultural conditioning. Their husbands were consistently unreliable and uncaring, and they perceived themselves as independent, courageous women who had managed to survive insurmountable hardships alone. Unlike the women in Cluster A who had not relinquished hope that their marriages would improve, the women in Cluster C were disillusioned with their marriages, and often with their lives more broadly, due to their difficult circumstances. The support they had received from nonprofit organizations helped them endure their hardships.</p>	Sunita, Kavita, Alisha, Iqra

After Ruksar's oldest daughter, Sakina, was born, unbeknownst to her, her husband had started engaging in substance use. When Sakina was two years old, her husband went out and did not return home at night. Panicked, she went looking for him but could not find him anywhere. Since there was no food to eat, she was forced to go to work the next day, taking Sakina along. This was the first time she engaged in scrap and waste work. Later that day, she received a call informing her that her husband had been arrested. Ruksar was so angry at her husband that she did not visit him in jail for several days. But her husband kept calling her, and eventually her heart softened. Thereafter, she visited the prison for the first time, accompanied by someone from the neighborhood who was familiar with the prison and gave him some clothes.

Ruksar was extremely scared of the prison, but she summoned her courage and was fortunate to be treated with sensitivity by a police officer who saw that Ruksar was overwhelmed. At the prison, she found out about her husband's substance use and addiction. She borrowed money to get him released from prison. Her husband returned from prison and was well behaved for several days, only to return to his old habits. This was when Ruksar interacted with a lawyer for the first time, and while she was scared, being accompanied by another person from the neighborhood and observing her neighbor's interactions with the lawyer helped Ruksar learn how to talk to lawyers and overcome her fear.

After her husband returned from prison, when Ruksar tried to get her husband to quit substances, her husband would fight with her and become physically violent. He would leave the house and come back the next day, and his engagement in substance use only increased. Ever since, the same cycle has repeated itself, whereby her husband gets into trouble under the influence of substances and then gets imprisoned. Each time he is imprisoned, since he does not have access to substances, he is better behaved and promises to improve his behavior upon

returning. He begs and pleads with her to bail him out. Yet once he is back home, he goes back to his old patterns of substance use and domestic violence, beating her up when she asks him to change or shoulder household responsibilities. Now Ruksar has stopped trying to bail her husband out and she has learned that her husband's promises to improve his behavior do not mean anything. However, upon being asked if her husband's imprisonment is better for her than his freedom, she said, "It is, but then I need support too. I go to work, and I have children, so who will look after the children?"

Having gone through this cycle multiple times, Ruksar told me that she has contemplated leaving her husband. She said, "I would sometimes feel like doing something, sometimes I would feel like leaving him and running away. My heart feels like doing all of these things, then I look at my child's face and have to stay." Even though Ruksar's daughters think that their father is a bad man and often ask their mother to leave, she knows that her children will not be accepted by another man. She knows being a single mother will be difficult and frowned upon. Ruksar's mother and siblings have even told her to leave, but she knows that if she leaves, she will be blamed for not making her marriage work. When asked if she has ever thought about taking her children and running away, Ruksar said:

Yes, and here there are those [women] who left, but others don't see that, they only blame the women...the people say, "There must be some faults in the woman, that's why [she] left." ...They say, "Can't she make the marriage work? Today there is distress and suffering but who knows, good days may come tomorrow." This is how people talk here. So, because of that, one has to make the marriage work.

Ever since that first day of working, Ruksar has continued to do waste work, making Rs. 15,000 (\$180.67) a month. The work is physically grueling and has taken a toll on her health,

and she already has aches in her stomach due to having had two caesarian deliveries. However, work also led her to make a friend who is in similar circumstances and understands her pain. Her friend reminds her that they don't have a choice but to bear these hardships. Ruksar said that her friend has told her, "Our life is just like this, sis. We will have to just live like this." Apart from sharing her distress with her friend, Ruksar keeps her sorrows to herself, crying in isolation. She knows that others around her, including her family, do not think that she should cry for her husband.

A month before our interview, Ruksar moved to live with her mother as she was unable to continue working and provide for her children due to falling ill. Currently, she lives with her mother, grandmother, and brother. Her mother helps with cooking and childcare. While Ruksar has become more independent and able to navigate the world, she feels that the world has changed her, and she laments the grief of not having a husband who can be the provider so that she wouldn't have to go and navigate the outside world. She feels sad when she sees women with husbands who take care of them. In such situations, she cries by herself and tries to console herself. Ruksar misses the way her husband used to be before he became a substance user. She hopes that her husband will improve and that they will eventually be able to live a better life. She continues to persist in these circumstances for the sake of her children, who she hopes will have a future that is better than hers.

### ***Cluster A Characteristics***

Cluster A represents the stories of four participants: Shahna, Ruksar, Fatima, and Ayesha (see Table 1). These participants had spouses who were repeat offenders arrested for petty crimes (e.g., robberies), often under the influence of intoxicants. Their husbands' substance use was often accompanied by domestic violence, which could be verbal as well as physical. After their

husbands' initial incarceration, these women made multiple unsuccessful attempts to get their husbands to quit substances. Because they had loving relationships with their husbands when they got married, they never anticipated that their lives would turn out this way, leaving them unprepared for how to deal with their circumstances.

**Yearning for How it Used to Be.** These women missed the emotional presence of their husbands—even when their husbands were physically present—because of the significant ways in which substance use and the “fast life” had changed who their husbands were and what their marriages were like. For instance, Fatima, a 25-year-old woman whose husband was imprisoned for being involved in a fight, lamented the loss of how her spousal relationship was earlier:

Earlier our life was very good. Now our life has become such that no one even knows.

When both husband-and-wife sleep, there is no love between us. He sleeps separately and I sleep separately...It feels strange, that he doesn't even love me. Even with work, it was fine because my man would love me. At least I was joking and laughing. There was no tension about life, nothing...Now there is nothing.

Women in this cluster also wrestled with the tension that their husbands were emotionally present *only when they were physically absent*. In other words, husbands were more emotionally engaged with their wives during periods of incarceration that were accompanied by sobriety. Furthermore, the desire for freedom and the longing to be outside, led men to express their yearning for their family during visitation. Each of these participants reported that their husbands told them they missed home and missed their wives and children during prison visits.

Despite the constant longing, disappointment, and heartbreak, these women continued to stay in their marriages hoping that their relationships would improve. For instance, Shahna, a 24-year-old woman whose husband was incarcerated for robbery, reported being physically and

verbally abused by her husband when he was home. However, she believed her husband was horrible to her due to the influence of drugs. She said she still loved her husband and hoped that he would improve in the future.

At the same time, each of these women reported being afraid that another partner would not be any better than their husband, and a second marriage could be just as bad or worse (i.e., an absence of lucrative alternatives). Such fears made them believe that leaving their marriages was not an option, and being single was also not an option, due to the possibility of receiving unwanted male attention.

**Prison: Sometimes an Enemy, Sometimes an Ally, but a Constant Presence.** For women in Cluster A, the prison acted as a rehabilitation facility where their husbands did not have access to substances and were better behaved. For instance, Ayesha, a 23-year-old woman whose husband had been arrested time and again for robbery and fighting and was released on bail at the time of the interview, said of her husband's behavior in prison, "I mean, he does not get drugs there, so he is a little better. He doesn't get drugs there." Similarly, while describing her husband's improved behavior during imprisonment, Fatima narrated an instance when she visited her husband, and he expressed concern for her well-being:

He was asking, "How is your house running, Fatima? I came here, you must be so stressed." He was crying, "You will not be able to manage so much, tell the landlord that you'll pay the rent later. Don't worry about the rent right now."

However, all the women knew better than to trust their husbands' articulations of love during their prison stints. Yet these displays of love complicated their lives by leading to feelings of ambivalence towards their husbands.

At the same time, the prison was perceived as an enemy because the participants were overwhelmed with worry about their husbands' well-being during periods of incarceration. For example, Ayesha described:

No matter how useless one's man may be, there is still a little bit of attachment to him. It may not be a lot, but it is still a little bit. What must he be doing there? Is someone beating him up? What is he doing there? How must he be living there? We have to think about these things...When one's man is in prison, it doesn't feel good because which woman would feel good when her man is in prison alone?

These women themselves had numerous interactions with the carceral institution. They repeatedly visited the prison and underwent checking procedures that were cumbersome and humiliating. For instance, each of the women described having their clothes, shoes, hair checked during prison visitation. They described prison staff putting their hands on their bodies to check for contraband, which made them feel like criminals themselves. These women talked to police officers, trying to plead with them with the hope that they could free their husbands. They regularly interacted with prison staff and with other actors of the criminal justice system, including lawyers. Their constant interactions with the criminal justice system led them to become highly integrated into the carceral institution themselves, with the prison becoming a constant presence in their lives.

**Receiving Support but Without Permission to Grieve.** For women in Cluster A, their support systems acted as sources of tough love. Due to their husbands' poor reputations in the neighborhood, their loved ones regularly reminded them to not mourn them. The women were told that it was not acceptable to cry for their husbands since their husbands were at fault. As a result, these women did not have the permission to openly mourn their loss. They either tried to

not grieve and suppress their sadness, or they had to grieve their husbands' absence and the loss of their relationship in private. Ayesha offers a glimpse of this lack of permission to grieve:

When I cry, I cry for a few days. I mean I cry for two days, for three days, then I become fine. Then I don't cry anymore. Then my grandma and others shout at me, "Why are you crying? Who are you crying for? When he doesn't care about you then who are you crying for?" Then she scolds me, she shouts at me. Then I don't cry.

**Begrudging Acceptance and Self-sufficiency.** Women in Cluster A demonstrated the ability to survive not only their interactions with the criminal justice system but also their partners' continual involvement in the "fast life," filled with criminality, substance use, and constant brushes with law enforcement. Survival in their circumstances meant being able to adapt to the erratic, tumultuous life that accompanied their partners' involvement in substance use and criminality. They seemed to have accepted and adapted to their circumstances. For instance, Shahna told me that she had even begun to like living alone each time her husband was imprisoned. Acceptance, in this case, meant making peace with having an absentee partner who was unable to shoulder any responsibilities, as well as being able to bear the stigma that came with having a partner who was viewed as a thief and criminal. These women had no choice but to shoulder the new role of being a breadwinner and raising their children singlehandedly, even though most of them were raised with the expectation of being homemakers and had never worked prior to spousal incarceration or acquired the literacy or vocational skills to find employment.

These women were quite independent. Increased self-sufficiency financially resulted in greater power within the household and greater ability of women to assert themselves. They had learned to stand up for themselves in the outside world as well as inside their homes, in the face

of violence from their husbands. These participants were able to motivate themselves to persist. Having real life models, due to living in neighborhoods where substance use and the fast life was prevalent and even the norm, who they could observe and learn pragmatic skills from helped them imbibe these survival skills. Their desire to ensure that their children were cared for and had a secure future were the primary motivations that kept them going. They focused their energies on hanging on for the sake of their children and working to improve their financial circumstances.

### **Cluster B: Unconditionally Devoted**

#### *Anju's Story*

Anju, a 38-year-old Hindu mother of three, grew up in a loving family with six siblings, including five sisters and a brother. Her parents brought her up with patriarchal values of being a dutiful wife who is respectful to her in-laws. At 20 years of age, she was married off by her family to her husband, whose family was known to her relatives. Upon getting married, Anju fell in love with her husband because of how helpful and good natured he was. While talking about falling in love with her husband, Anju shared:

He has a very good heart. Even if you were to meet him, you would say, "This is not a person but a diamond that has graced the Earth." From the beginning, my husband has been a person who likes to help everyone. I liked that. Because of this, because of his behavior, I liked him.

Anju and her husband lived in the village happily. Her husband provided for the family while she lived at home. During this time, Anju shared that her husband, along with his father, was wrongfully incarcerated for a murder that she believes was committed by an upper caste man. She had just given birth to their daughter when her husband was incarcerated; he went to

prison when his daughter was merely six months old. He stayed in prison as an undertrial for seven years. Anju visited her husband once in a span of six months, as he was housed in a prison far away. She often received phone calls from prison staff telling her how her husband was doing, due to her husband's good relationship with the prison staff. They kept in touch by writing letters to one another, which she has held on to and re-reads each time she misses him. Anju shared:

In seven years, I collected so many of his letters that I cannot even count how many letters there were. He would send a letter each month. I kept each letter close to me, close to my heart, the way someone preserves gold. Whenever my heart would be heavy, I would take a letter out and start reading it. I would fall asleep while reading...

After seven more years, Anju's husband returned on bail. During this time, Anju went to live with his family in the village. However, after two months, her husband's family financially separated them due to not wanting to take care of their expenses. Anju and her husband lived together for four years, and she conceived her remaining two children, another daughter, and a son. When Anju's son was just a year old, her husband returned to prison after receiving a conviction and a sentence of life imprisonment. Once her husband returned to prison, Anju returned to live with her parents. Out of concern for providing for her children, she began working as a helper in an Anganwadi, making Rs. 7000 (\$84.40) a month. While in the beginning she was afraid of the outside world, she got over her fears through exposure as well as motivating self-talk and her desire to be able to educate her children. She learned how to do her work by observing her peers and shared a good relationship with all her co-workers.

Until roughly three years ago, Anju had hopes that her husband would be declared innocent by the Supreme Court. But the Supreme Court upheld a guilty verdict, and Anju

realized that her husband may be incarcerated for his whole life. Due to the grief and disappointment of this news, her health worsened, and she started having chest pains and thyroid problems. Throughout her husband's incarceration, Anju has kept her relationship and love alive by visiting him in prison, celebrating key occasions with him and through daily phone calls. Talking about her visit to the prison on Karwa Chauth, an Indian festival where women fast for their husband's long life, Anju told me:

Only last year I went for Karwa Chauth, and my heart was so happy. I felt that I had to go to meet him on that day. I felt that if I wanted to see him then I would see him on the day of Karwa Chauth. So, I went to meet him.

Anju said that she and her husband have a telepathic connection where they can read what is on each other's minds without having to say anything. Anju described:

Whatever I want to say from my heart, the same thing comes from his heart too. I don't know how this magic happens... This has happened to us a lot of times... And sometimes what we are able to say from our heart, the same thing comes out of his heart. I have seen this a lot of times. So, my husband says, "This is our love, which is attached to us and is still there between us."

It is her unconditional love and attachment to her husband that motivates Anju to continue being in this relationship, and she says that she will keep waiting for him and continue in this marriage even if he were to never return. It is also her belief in her husband's innocence and her love for him that has helped her respond to any questions that others in the neighborhood may have had and stand by him in the face of disbelief and gossip from those around her. Anju's children keep asking her when their father will return. She says that this breaks her heart, but she

does not tell them that he might never return because she does not want to take their hope away. Anju's undying love for her husband helps her not lose hope and to continue to survive.

### *Cluster B Characteristics*

Cluster B represents the stories of six participants: Anju, Priya, Ria, Shehnaaz, Rita, and Shaina. This cluster of stories, as aptly illustrated by Anju's story, was marked by undying love between the participants and their spouses and an intense sense of heartbreak due to their forced separation. For each of these participants, their belief in their husband's innocence and wrongful conviction was staunch and consistent. Despite incarceration and the resulting separation, their marriage had not just continued but had even become stronger throughout incarceration, as their husbands were their close confidants and support systems, who continued to be the only ones they truly confided in and shared their distress with.

**Unconditionally Devoted.** For each of these participants, their love and attachment to their husbands motivated them to wait for their husbands and remain wholly committed to their marriages. In fact, the thought of leaving their husbands had not even crossed their mind. Ria, a 20-year-old participant, whose husband was imprisoned four years ago after being arrested for allegedly sexually assaulting a minor, said that love had stopped her from even contemplating the thought of leaving her husband:

From my side it's just that...you might think that this is an old-fashioned way to think...[but] according to me, marriage happens only once, right? Love also happens only once...It's just that I have never thought about getting married to someone else. And neither will I ever need to think that way.

These women reported never experiencing mistreatment or violence of any kind from their husbands. They reported being cherished as well as loved by their husbands. Like Anju,

these women described deep, telepathic-like connections with their husbands, who could detect distress in their voices even when they tried to hide their misery from them. For example, Shaina, a 43-year-old woman whose husband is incarcerated on a rape charge, described:

He can tell just looking at my face. [Even if] he can't see my face. On the phone, from my voice, he is able to tell [if something is wrong] ...[but] if I tell him about all my troubles, then I don't know what will happen [to him] inside.

Participants in this cluster described their husbands as good men who had supported them financially as well as emotionally prior to their incarceration. For instance, while talking about her love for her husband, Shehnaaz, a 34-year-old woman whose husband was incarcerated for homicide, shared:

If I ask for anything, he will buy it immediately. To date, he's never said no to me for anything. Whatever I asked for, he got for me, whether he had the money or not. Never, it's been 18-19 years, he has never slapped me even once or said anything to me.

These women viewed their husbands as men who did not have any vices. They described their spouses as helpful, good natured and law-abiding citizens. Ria said that the reason she fell in love with her husband was, "Just his conduct/way of living, and how he stayed with his family, he would care for everyone, [that's] just this thing." This conceptualization of their husbands as good men provided women with an intrinsic motivation to stand by their spouses.

Moreover, women in Cluster B described how their husbands' financial and emotional support continued throughout imprisonment. Their husbands were truly worried and disappointed in their inability to contribute more to their wives' and families' lives due to their incarceration. Shehnaaz's husband would often ask, "How are you taking care of the kids? What are you doing? How are you managing? This is difficult for you." Due to their care and concern

for their wives, incarcerated spouses of these participants did what they could to help their partners out, whether it meant finding employment in the prison and sending money and groceries back home or being emotionally present always for their partners and reminding their partners to take care of their health. Talking about her husband's efforts to help their family from prison, Shaina said:

Even while being inside, he does labor. From there too he sends oil, soap, snacks. He brings and gets food for influential people, does some work for them. So, he is able to send some food for the kids from inside too.

Some incarcerated spouses tried to find employment when they were back on home visits temporarily or tried to shoulder childcare responsibilities to help their spouses out. As a result, their relationships with their partners seemed like healthy, romantic, and loving partnerships.

**Maintaining Connection and Imagining Their Future.** A key characteristic of Cluster B was that participants maintained regular contact with their husbands, helping them nurture a strong marital connection and imagine a hopeful future together. For example, frequent phone calls created daily intimacy in the participants' lives by filling in gaps about their partners' daily whereabouts and well-being. Being able to talk daily and ask about the person's well-being helped participants keep their intimate partner relationship alive. While describing the conversations that took place over the phone with her husband, Priya, a 22-year-old woman, whose husband was serving a sentence after being charged for rape, said that her husband often asked her, "'Are you fine? Are the children fine?' I said, 'Everything is fine here. Are you fine?'" Similarly, prison visits helped participants see their partners, even if for brief moments. Two women, Shehnaaz and Shaina, experienced home visits where their husbands were home for up to two weeks before returning to the prison (home visits are granted regularly to convicted

prisoners serving sentences longer than five years, as a way to facilitate gradual reintegration into society upon release). Ria's husband had come for half a day, after being granted 'emergency parole' to attend his father's cremation. For Shehnaaz and Shaina, the return of their husbands during home visits was a joyous and festive occasion, due to the opportunity to be reunited with their husbands. While describing how she and her children prepared for her husband's home visits, Shaina said:

Tomorrow if I have to parole him, then today I will buy fish and get, wash it, and keep it in the fridge. Then the day he will get parole, if I have to get him in the evening, before going I would do all the preparation. Fry the fish, separately making the fish curry, making rice. I would make everything. Then in the evening the kids also get ready. They bathe and wear good clothes, like it's Eid for them.

Imagined intimacy in the future kept the intimacy in the present alive in these participants' relationships. The separation even brought them closer together, strengthening their commitment to each other and to supporting one another through this difficult time. For instance, Ria described how her marital relationship had not worsened due to her husband's incarceration:

...as of now, there is no change. In fact, it's the opposite, I would say that our relationship had become even stronger because even he says, "I get a lot of strength by seeing that you are standing with my family."

In some cases, the physical distance was interpreted by participants as the foundation that would make the future relationship even closer once the incarcerated partner was released from prison.

**Heartbroken but Strong.** Due to their attachment to their spouses and their love for their spouses, these women experienced emotional distress because of the physical separation

that accompanied incarceration. This separation was very painful to deal with and caused them to break down. They yearned for their spouses to return home. The same contact that helped them nurture their connection to their spouse and gave them hope for the future also reminded them of how much they had lost, and how much they were continuing to lose every single day. For instance, Rita, a 38-year-old participant whose husband an undertrial, was released on bail at the time of the interview, described how difficult it was to be separated from her husband after visitation. She reported feeling uneasy, feeling like something was being left behind.

However, participants remained strong. They were able to survive this separation while making ends meet and raising their children alone. Prior to their spouse's incarceration, these participants were happily married and had played the role of a homemaker without worrying about being the financial provider. As a result, spousal incarceration required them to suddenly adapt to life as single parents, taking on the role of the breadwinner while yearning for their partners to come home. At the same time, they had to manage their feelings of anger at the criminal justice system and maintain hope that justice would be served, and their partners would be released. Their partners' love and support from afar helped them stay strong.

### **Cluster C: Independent and Disillusioned**

#### ***Kavita's Story***

Kavita, a 40-year-old Hindu mother of two, is an orphan who lived with her brother's family before meeting her spouse. She met her husband after she had already given birth to her first daughter with another man. She fell in love with her husband and decided to marry him against the wishes of her family, and her family severed ties with her. Kavita's daughter, Sonu, was never accepted by her husband's family. In the beginning the marriage was fine, and then her husband was arrested for homicide in 2008, for which he was sentenced to life

imprisonment. Kavita believed that her husband must have been guilty as he was pronounced guilty by the judicial system. To make ends meet, Kavita took up menial work such as waste picking and working as a helper in a beauty parlor. Her husband would occasionally come home for furlough and the home environment would be fine aside from some fighting, which she said, “happens in every household.”

In 2020, due to the COVID pandemic, Kavita’s husband was sent home, and he lived at home for almost three years. This was the period where his substance use increased and so did the fighting. He verbally and physically abused Kavita, Sonu, and his aging mother who lived in the same house. Describing the violence, Kavita shared:

He continued drinking, fighting, beating, using horrible cuss words, using the same abusive language with his mother, with his wife, with his daughter. Which I should not repeat, and I do not think I will even be able to repeat those cuss words, such bad words. We did not know if we would get food at night, would we eat or not? All he would do would be sleep, drink, fight, give us horrible cuss words throughout the night.

This period created an irreparable strain in Kavita’s marriage. However, during this time, Kavita got connected to a nonprofit organization which provided her with resources including emergency helpline numbers for the police. When the violence became so severe that Kavita and her daughters faced a threat to their lives, Kavita filed a police complaint against her husband and pursued a legal case against him. Kavita encountered numerous challenges, including being dismissed by the police:

They (police officers) would tell us, this is your household matter, this is a fight between a husband and wife, what will the police do. They would tell me to go to court and divorce my husband. They would give me this useless advice... So many times, we would

go to the police station, and no one would hear our complaint. Police officers behaved so rudely that I cannot even tell you. They would tell us “Eh, go away.”

In 2023, Kavita’s husband returned to the prison, as all the inmates were called back. Since then, peace has returned to her household as she is able to go back to living life on her own terms, including cooking the food she wants to eat and sleeping peacefully. She continues to work as a household help, earning about Rs. 10,000 (\$120.63) to Rs. 12,000 (\$144.75) a month. Kavita does not feel attached to her husband anymore and does not have any love for him. She said, “I do not want to think about my husband...Now, in my heart I have this feeling that I do not want to think about anyone, not about my husband.” However, Kavita remains married to her husband out of necessity, as she needs her mother-in-law’s help with childcare and does not have any other place to go to.

Through her experiences with work and her linkages with the nonprofit organization, Kavita has become brave and resourceful. She has learned how to navigate various institutions including the criminal justice system. Talking about how this journey has changed her, Kavita said:

Earlier I was completely stupid. Like completely stupid, what is called completely good for nothing, I was worse than that. I had never stepped out of the house. So, I just used to think that it’s okay, however it is, someday or another my husband will come back.

Everything will be good (yawns)...I got my strength and hopes from the time I became associated with the NGO, with all of you. Then I got a lot of strength and hope.

From being someone who mostly stayed at home and was afraid of everything, Kavita has become a person who can talk to lawyers, hold a job, provide for her family, and stand up for herself fearlessly.

### *Cluster C Characteristics*

Cluster C features the stories of four women: Sunita, Kavita, Alisha, and Iqra. These women were not attached to their husbands and had experienced grave hardship in their marriages. They had chosen to remain married to their husbands purely due to cultural conditioning. They did not share any form of closeness with their husbands and their husbands did not seem to have any regard for them. Unlike the women in Cluster A, who had not relinquished hope that their marriages would improve, the women in Cluster C were disillusioned with their marriages and resigned to being committed to a loveless union. Also, unlike the women in Cluster A whose spouses had been incarcerated for petty crimes, the spouses in Cluster C had been incarcerated for serious offences ranging from homicide to rape and were sentenced for a considerable period of time. This meant that they spent more time in prison and were at home less frequently compared to spouses in Cluster A, which provided wives with more time and opportunity to come to terms with the reality of their relationship.

**Renegotiating Identity: Viewing Self as Separate from Marriage.** These women's husbands were not reliable and had refused to shoulder any responsibility in their marriage in the past few years. For instance, Iqra, a 36-year-old participant, had been abandoned by her husband twice: first when she had experienced third degree burns after a gas cylinder exploded next to her while she was cooking in the kitchen, and again a few years later when he was convicted and sentenced, he put her on a bus with her children and told her to "take care" of herself. Similarly, Sunita, a 40-year-old participant, reported never being taken seriously or cared for by her husband since the beginning of their marriage. Her husband often beat her up and listened to his own family members over her.

For these participants, their husbands' presence at home was not a source of support but was a source of stress, as their husbands became emotionally, verbally and/or physically violent towards them as well as their children. When they *were* home for home visits, they would keep to themselves or leave the house altogether instead of helping out or shouldering any household responsibilities. As a result, the participants were a lot more at peace in the absence of their husbands. Unfavorable experiences with their spouses led these women to harbor resentment or disillusionment towards their marriage, which they saw as beyond redemption. This led these participants to view their identities as separate from their husbands. Thus, these women did not give importance to the role or identity of "wife" anymore. For instance, upon being asked if she felt her identity was linked to her husband, Iqra said, "My identity is from me."

These participants perceived themselves as courageous women who had been able to endure a lot and had become very independent and agentic. Iqra described herself as a brave person, sharing, "I think yeah, I am very courageous person. I have courage...strength and courage are generated from within a person. You cannot see these things from outside." These participants had internalized a more favorable self-perception due to their ability to persist in extremely challenging circumstances. They also described how other members of their support system (e.g., family members, employers, nonprofit organization members) validated and echoed this perception. For instance, Iqra said that her family members often wondered where she got her courage from: "Even my family members say this, 'Where does so much courage come from? So much courage and strength...'"

**Going the Distance Alone.** Women in Cluster C had survived difficult, unsupportive, violent marital relationships as well as the challenges of spousal incarceration, including severe material hardship, by tapping into their inner strength. They had shouldered the dual roles of

breadwinner and homemaker, raising their children alone, knowing that they would have to continue fulfilling these responsibilities singlehandedly for the rest of their lives. These participants had learned to navigate institutional structures including the carceral institution, police, landlords, and systems of employment. For instance, Iqra described independently dealing with landlords who were exploitative:

I learned all of this while living here because I don't fight with anyone and neither do I give an impertinent answer to anyone. Because if I respond back rudely then it is their house, so at any time they can tell us, "Vacate the house!" That's why I just bear with patience and stay calm.

The women were able to withstand difficult situations and persist in challenging interactions with institutional actors including policemen, despite being mistreated. While some of these women had familial support, they described feeling completely alone due to their uniquely difficult life circumstances. Their choice to continue being married to their partners, despite familial insistence to step out of these marriages or familial pressure to not complain and make the marriage work, could make them reluctant to share their distress with family members. They often felt like they were different from everyone around them, and no one could truly understand what they were going through. Three of the four women in this cluster (Kavita, Alisha, and Iqra) were connected to nonprofit organizations from which they derived support. The support from non-governmental organizations facilitated their resilience and bolstered their self-confidence.

With an understanding of the types of stories that were articulated by women experiencing spousal incarceration in India and the defining characteristics of those stories, I now turn to a broader discussion of the overarching themes that span the narratives of

participants' lived experiences. I pay particular attention to how women's day-to-day experiences are shaped by intersecting systems of privilege and oppression, particularly those tied to gender and class.

### **Overarching Themes**

In this section, I identify and theorize the overarching themes that explain and encapsulate the lived experiences of wives of incarcerated men. The section includes three main themes: (a) *a complicated relationship with patriarchy*, (b) *the weight of socioeconomic disenfranchisement*, and (c) *when resilience is not a choice*. Each theme is comprised of various subthemes, as described in detail below.

#### **A Complicated Relationship with Patriarchy**

The first theme explores the multidimensional, complex relationship participants had with patriarchy. While patriarchy placed women of incarcerated spouses in an inferior position relative to the men in their household as well as their in-laws, internalizing this ideology and belief system helped participants cope with their distress by ensuring conformity to the rules that they were expected to adhere to. As a result of being indoctrinated into patriarchal ways of thinking and living, participants did not feel infuriated even while being subjected to mistreatment. They did not attempt to challenge the way they were treated because they did not think that they were being treated unjustly. This enabled them to focus on the business of survival by preserving their mental energy. However, internalized patriarchy caused participants to not be able to recognize ways in which this dominant ideology was a restraining force that relegated them to an inferior position in society. At the same time, by conforming to patriarchal rules, the participants aligned themselves with the dominant ideology and asserted themselves within its confines, which could be viewed as an act of agency. Furthermore, through

conformity, they found support in their family members and other members of the community who lauded them for being dutiful, self-sacrificing women, who were deserving of support and sympathy. For instance, Ria, a 20-year-old participant shared:

My mother-in-law feels proud because I am standing with her because see, there are a lot of women whose husbands are in prison, who don't stick even for a month, they settle their second house/they marry a second time. Because this has happened a lot here, in our area. That's why this family supports me a lot. And as far as my natal family is concerned, in my natal family they say, "Child, we don't know how you are so courageous!"

The internalization of patriarchal rules did not just ensure their personal survival; it also preserved and perpetuated this system intergenerationally, as women passed these rules on to their children. Women themselves became agents of patriarchy who upheld and passed on this system of values and expectations, particularly to female children. In this section, I present the ways in which internalized patriarchal beliefs acted both as a constraining force *and* as a vital source of meaning making.

### ***Patriarchy as a Constraining Force: Gendered Burden of Caregiving***

Internalized patriarchy translated into gendered burden of care-work, whereby women and female relatives, including female children, shouldered the responsibility of taking care of their younger siblings while their mothers went outside to provide for the family. This disproportionate gendered division of work, whereby care-work is primarily if not solely borne by women, was transmitted intergenerationally. Female children were expected to fulfill caregiving responsibilities of their younger siblings, such as waking them up, preparing food for them, and picking them from school. For instance, Shaina's oldest daughter took care of the

household work and looked after her siblings while Shaina went to work. Sometimes, older female children also ended up sacrificing their own education to care for their siblings. Kavita's daughter Sonu dropped out of high school to care for her infant sister so that Kavita could return to work as a household help. Female children often were responsible for a range of household tasks including cooking and cleaning. Shouldering such responsibilities forced older female children to grow up and become mature beyond their years and act like adults, even though they were themselves children.

Caregiving responsibilities also were undertaken and managed by other women in participants' families, including their mothers, mothers-in-law, and sisters-in-law. For instance, Priya, a 22-year-old participant said that her mother-in-law helped her take care of her young children. Emotional care was provided solely by female relatives and friends who were shoulders to cry on. Ria, a 20-year-old participant reported that her mother-in-law did not let her sleep at night by herself so that she did not feel lonely.

### ***Patriarchy as a Constraining Force: Gatekeeping of Financial and Legal Information***

Another way in which patriarchy acted as a constraining force for wives of incarcerated spouses was in how they were gatekept from financial and legal information about their circumstances. Most women were not aware of legal status of the case, as legal processes were handled by male family members. In some cases, women were not even aware of the details of the crime for which their spouses had been arrested, and in other cases they were not aware of the legal charges. For instance, Rita, a 38-year-old participant reported not knowing the reason for her husband's incarceration and being unaware of the details of his legal case. Priya, a 22-year-old participant said that she did not know the name of the prison in which her spouse was incarcerated. In one situation, Iqra, a 36-year-old woman did not even know the duration of her

husband's sentence at the time of his arrest. Only later when she visited her husband in prison did she find out that he would be released after roughly 10 years of imprisonment. Sometimes participants were not even present for the court proceedings. For instance, Rita said she never went to court when her husband's case was being tried, as she knew nothing about the status or timing of court processes.

Rarely did participants handle communication with lawyers. They were often not taken for any consultations with the lawyers or even kept informed about legal updates from these consultations. For instance, Sunita, a 40-year-old participant, reported not knowing anything about the case as her husband's brothers were taking care of the communication with lawyers. Her illiteracy had been given as the reason for not keeping her informed. Justifying their decision for not taking her along for any legal proceedings or consultations, her brothers-in-law told her, "You are illiterate, you will make things worse, what if you said something crazy?" Similarly, most participants reported never having communicated with lawyers. Even in situations where the women knew everything about the case or were literate, they were not involved in legal communication. For instance, Ria, a 20-year-old participant who had completed high school, was literate, and understood the details of the charge that her husband was facing, said, "No, I have not spoken to lawyers...The men go, so only they talk to lawyers."

Even if women sought updates about the legal processes, they could be met with brief, inadequate responses. For instance, Anju, a 38-year-old participant who was aware of the court proceedings and details of the sentence, often asked her brother-in-law about his conversations with the lawyer. However, she received limited information, as she describes here:

I said, "You went today so, what conversation took place there? What did he say? Can something be done in his case or not?" There should be some solution to this problem so

that he comes out in some way or the other. So, he'll just say, "It's going on, we are trying. We are doing [what we can]. We have told [the lawyer]."

Participants communicated with lawyers only in situations where there were no other relatives, specifically male relatives. For instance, Ayesha, a 23-year-old woman, said that at an earlier point in time, her father and father-in-law would take care of the legal processes including communication with the lawyer. It was only after her in-laws' severed ties with her husband and her, that she spoke to the lawyer herself.

In addition to legal information, some women were unaware of the details of their husband's finances, including case-related expenditures and their family's financial status. For instance, Kavita, a woman in her early 40s, said upon being asked about her husband's income prior to his incarceration, "Now this I do not know, I do not know how much he used to earn, but he used to be able to provide for the ration and food supplies." In joint family households, where the participants lived with their in-laws, they could also be unaware of how much debt the family was in or where the money had been borrowed. For instance, upon being asked about debts, Priya, a 22-year-old participant who lived with her mother-in-law, sister-in-law, and two children said, "My mother-in-law has borrowed money. Now I don't know from who." Thus, women were not trusted with legal and financial information, due to the patriarchal assumption that women should have access to, and would not be able to understand, such information.

### ***Patriarchy as a Constraining Force: Being Stigmatized and Sexualized***

A third way in which patriarchy acted as an oppressive force for wives of incarcerated spouses was in how they were simultaneously stigmatized and sexualized by surrounding community members. For example, women were blamed for their partners' offenses, judged on how well they were performing their role as *good wives* in the absence of their husbands, and

sexualized as “available women” who could be pursued now that their husbands were away. This made women the target of neighborhood gossip, unwanted male attention, and unsafety in public spaces. Despite staying in their marriages so as to not be seen as bad wives and mothers, participants were viewed with stigma and suspicion. This stigmatization was driven by a patriarchal understanding of how a married woman should behave. Often, people talked and assumed that if women went out of the house when their husbands were away, then they must be romantically and/or sexually involved with other men. The fear of this neighborhood gossip caused women to surveil their own behavior and their clothing choices. For instance, Ayesha, a 23-year-old participant, described:

I want to live for myself. I should wear what I want, I should talk like that, go out like that. I want to live, but here in our neighborhood, the environment is not like that. If I were to do something [like that], everyone would gossip. Everyone talks a lot here, “She must have a lover, that is why she is doing this. That is why she is going out.” Everyone says a lot of different things.

Similarly, other participants described ways in which they monitored their behavior by ensuring that they were not friendly with any men in the neighborhood. so as to not raise suspicion. One of the participants, Shahna, a 24-year-old woman, even reported being afraid of going to find work in places located at a distance due to the likelihood that others in the neighborhood would gossip and accuse her of having an affair.

Some participants reported being sexualized by other men, who viewed their husbands’ absence as an opportunity to pursue them. For instance, Shaina, a 43-year-old woman whose husband was incarcerated for a rape charge and still awaiting sentencing, described an instance where a neighborhood shopkeeper had tried to pursue her. Narrating the incident, she described:

That shopkeeper is such a bastard. In the very beginning, when I came here...He told me, "You keep talking to me, you keep greeting me." ...So, one day...the flat owner, whose house I work in (as a household help), had sent me to get a paan from his shop, so, I went to his shop to buy paan. So, he started saying, "Shaina, you should do friendship with me." I said, "Here is your money." I had to give him money, so I gave it to him in his hand and said, "Here take your money and in the future, you don't need to talk to me." Ruksar, a 28-year-old woman, similarly narrated being on the receiving end of harassment and teasing:

I go out to work, so many people chase after me... "Your man is like this. I will bear your expenditure. Talk to me. Go out with me." They keep tempting me with money. "I will keep you nicely. Why are you living like this? Why are you wasting your youth?" They say such dirty things. I silently walk away and keep crying. I silently walked away from there. I am unable to even say anything. If it was just one person, I would have said something. But there are two or three people who keep sitting there and saying such things, so how do I say anything to them? Then I avoid walking from there the next day.

Such experiences made it uncomfortable, even unsafe for women to freely access public spaces as they had to be careful to not draw attention. Such experiences of stigmatization and unwanted male attention reinforced the notion that public spaces were not safe for women, thereby perpetuating the patriarchal belief that a woman's place was in the domestic sphere, within her household. This led women to view the outside world as an unpleasant, corrupting influence.

Participants also experienced stigma by association, whereby they were blamed by others including police officers for their husbands' engagement in crimes. For instance, Ruksar, a 28-

year-old woman, recounted instances when she was called to the police station after her husband had been arrested and held responsible for his actions. She said the police officers told her, “You have made him steal. You make him steal.” A few other participants reported being accused of intimidation by the victim’s family. For instance, Priya, a 22-year-old participant said, “The girl said...I, my mother-in-law, my sister-in-law, we go every day and beat her up. We go every day to beat her up in her house. We beat her up and then come back home.” Similarly, Ria, a 20-year-old participant, alleged that the victim had accused her family and her of pressuring her to withdraw her complaint. Thus, patriarchy constrained women’s freedom of movement, including their ability to dress and live the way they wanted, by subjecting them to stigmatization and sexualization.

### ***Patriarchy as a Source of Meaning: A Relational Identity***

Although patriarchy reinforced oppressive conditions for women in critical ways, it also was an ideology from which they derived meaning. For example, patriarchy acted in conjunction with collectivism to help women cope with their circumstances. Collectivism is a preponderant ideology whereby interdependence is a valued characteristic and group goals are prioritized over individual goals (Chitnis, 2004; Desai, 2006). As a result, participants were raised to exhibit conformity, solidarity, and familial cohesion. This collectivistic ideology was responsible for a relational sense of identity that participants embodied, which included a desire to keep the family together and live in a joint household with multiple generations of family. For instance, Priya, a 22-year-old participant, valued living in a joint family household, which her husband’s incarceration had disrupted. She explained:

We used to stay together, we used to eat food together, all our family members, my mother-in-law. Now there is no one to see. My daughter has become alone, there is no

one in the house. I don't have a brother-in-law or a father-in-law. It's just the two of us at home. The house is empty.

A collectivistic ideology in concert with a patriarchal upbringing led to the prioritization of familial/communal interests over self-interest. Participants' purpose, aspirations, motivations, happiness, and distress were linked to their family. When Ria, a 20-year-old participant was asked about her hopes and dreams, she said:

It's just that there was only one dream that I had, which has been left behind. All the dreams I had dreamt were of how we would live after marriage, of the home we would make, of how we would live nicely in a joint family.

The participants placed their families, particularly their husbands and children, before themselves. As a result, they thought about their spouses, children, and families first and prioritized the needs of their loved ones, often putting themselves last. However, this internalized collectivistic ideology also acted as a resource by ensuring that there were family members to help shoulder the burden of care-work. For example, Ruksar, a 28-year-old participant was currently living with her mother due to being unable to pay for rent. She said, "I am living with my mother, so my mother is able to take care of my children. She is able to cook lunch and then I come back in the evening and cook." Furthermore, the presence of multiple generations in a household could mean that there were family members who could provide recreational support and a shoulder to cry on. For instance, Ria, a 20-year-old participant who lived in a joint household with her mother-in-law and multiple brothers-in-law and their families, said:

The best thing is that if you have any problem, whether it is financial or about the ego, or whether it is about your emotional feelings, for everything you have benefits...As of now, if emotionally someone has a reason to be sad, then everyone shares their problems.

Internalized patriarchy, in conjunction with being raised in a collectivistic society, also reinforced the *salience of motherhood* for participants, such that their identities as mothers took precedence and were the most important identities they held. They had been socialized, through consistent messaging from natal family, extended family, in-laws, neighbors, and friends, to conceptualize “mother” as someone who protects her children and prioritizes her children over everything else. This ingrained importance attached to their identity as mothers both reinforced the de-prioritization of self *and* was a source of joy and meaning. Kavita, a participant in her early 40s, who was a mother to two daughters said, “If my children are happy then that brings me happiness.” Spending time with their children also helped participants cope with their circumstances. For instance, Priya, a 22-year-old participant who was a mother to two infants, said that she spent her time playing with her children. Being a mother was the primary source of purpose in women’s lives, which gave them the motivation to carry on despite extreme hardship. Fatima, a 25-year-old participant upon being asked what helped her carry on despite her tribulations, said, “I want to live for my children. My child smiles, he stays happy, just that much is enough for me.”

### ***Patriarchy as a Motivator: Not Leaving One’s Marriage***

Of the 14 participants, not one viewed divorce as a feasible option. Even when their marriages were unhappy, dysfunctional, and violent, participants chose to stay in their marriages. Marriage was a key domain in which women’s complicated relationship with patriarchy was visible. On the one hand, patriarchy and collectivism acted as constraining forces that made it difficult to leave their marriages; on the other hand, women’s ability to keep their marriage intact was a powerful and meaningful metric that they used to assess themselves as good wives and mothers. Patriarchy was a double-edged sword, one that could lead to punitive

consequences for leaving one's marriage yet being praised and receiving recognition for making one's marriage work.

All participants voiced their internalized beliefs about the centrality of marriage to a meaningful life. Participants were raised with the understanding that marriage was the most important event in a woman's life. Demonstrating the belief that marriage is everything a woman could want, Shaina said, "You've gotten married and have had kids, what else do you want from your life?" As a result, while growing up, most of their dreams and aspirations revolved around marriage. For instance, Iqra, a 36-year-old participant, shared how as a girl, she dreamed about how her marriage would be: "I had thought that yeah, once I get married, I will live like this. We will go out; I will wear nice clothes. These are the dreams one has."

Furthermore, participants had been brought up to believe that marriage required a lot of adjustment by women. Women were supposed to live as per the rules of the house they were married into. These rules determined where women could go, what they could do, and with whom and when. Participants believed that after being married, they were supposed to behave maturely, be subservient, demure, and dress up like a wife. This belief is illustrated by Shaina, who shared, "I mean I didn't know how to tie a saree. Suit-salwar...I used to wear frocks and roam around in shorts. And after marriage, you have to wear sarees, suit-salwar." Participants believed that after getting married, the process of marital adjustment involved looking after one's in-laws and treating them with respect no matter what. This is illustrated by Anju, a 38-year-old participant, who said:

I respect everything about her, I complete all her work on time. I have never said anything wrong to her. Why haven't I said anything wrong to her? Because our parents have not given us permission to speak like that. Our parents say that "She is old, it doesn't

matter if she even said something, you shouldn't mind it because she is an older person.

Don't mind it. Do not pay any heed to it. Don't mind it.”

Most participants were married to their spouses at a very young age, when they were merely adolescents. Eleven of the 14 participants were 18 years of age or younger at the time of marriage. This resulted in the lack of access to power within the household due to being seen as too young and not mature enough to be able to make decisions. At the same time, limited exposure to the world and the paucity of worldly knowledge prevented participants from being able to understand ways to navigate their marriage or assert power within their households. For instance, while talking about her expectations when she was getting married, Alisha, a 35-year-old participant shared, “At that time, my brain was like that of a child. I was married off at 15 years of age. At that time, we were all very stupid.”

Participants believed that women were supposed to prioritize marriage over all other relationships, including friendships. Consequently, a few women reported not having visited their childhood friends ever since they got married. Throughout their childhoods, participants were socialized into the role of a homemaker. This anticipatory socialization prepared them to make these adjustments and assume the role of a homemaker once they were married. Often, just the lack of conflict in the marital relationship was enough for a marriage to be framed as “good.” The expectations for the women to adjust were so high, and the expectations from marriage itself were so low, that the absence of short temper/violence was heralded as the marker of a marriage without any challenges. For instance, Shehnaaz, a 34-year-old woman said, “It's been 18-19 years, he has never slapped me even once or said anything to me.” Similarly, Kavita, a participant in her early 40s, perceived her marriage as good in the beginning because there was not a lot of fighting between her spouse and her.

Notably, participants received praise for displaying commitment to their marriage, which incentivized them to remain committed to their marriage. Shahna, a 24-year-old participant, said that she was often praised by people in her neighborhood for standing by her husband and not leaving her marriage. At the same time, they were made to believe that the act of persisting in one's marriage was evidence of moral goodness, as sticking by one's husband and his family was heralded as "honorable" by in-laws, parents, and neighbors. For instance, Rita, a 38-year-old participant, said that even during times when she had fought with her husband and wanted to leave, her parents had refused to let her return to her natal home. Her mother had explicitly told her that she had to make her marriage work. On the other hand, participants were afraid of being judged by neighbors and others for leaving their marriage. However, fear and social pressures were not the only reason that made women stay in their marriages; love and support from their partners contributed to sincerely-held personal desires for a lasting marriage. While participants were raised to believe that marriage was a lasting commitment that had to be upheld under all circumstances, these extrinsic social pressures comingled with sincerely-held intrinsic motivations to explain women's decisions to stay in their marriages throughout their husband's incarceration.

### ***Patriarchy as Control Couched with Care: Benevolent Sexism***

Finally, participants' complicated relationship with patriarchy also manifested in their experiences and reactions to *benevolent sexism* (Glick & Fiske, 1996), or sexism couched in concern, which can appear to be positive, but upon closer examination, can be read as patronizing. In the Indian context, benevolent sexism is often propagated by popular media and film (Pathak-Shelat, 2023) and often internalized by women (Kishore, 2023). This benevolent sexism, which often took the form of paternalistic protection for participants, was expressed by

specific others including in-laws and spouses. For instance, Priya, a 22-year-old participant, described always being accompanied while going outside of the house. Her husband had not permitted her to go outside alone, without his family members, as he was “concerned” about her well-being. Explaining the situation, Priya shared, “No, I have never gone, I have never gone anywhere alone. He gets scared about where I would go, where I wouldn’t go. He gets worried.” Similarly, Fatima, a 25-year-old participant, reported being told that she should not go outside the house to study or work by her mother-in-law who expressed concern for her safety.

This benevolent sexism took the form of controlling participants’ movements and ensuring that they received permission to take certain actions, including visiting natal family, visiting their incarcerated partners, and applying for jobs. However, the women often interpreted such control and paternalism as care and concern, rather than as curtailment of their freedom. Ria, a 20-year-old woman, lived in a joint household with her brothers, sisters-in-law, and mother-in-law. She reported never going to visit her husband in prison without her mother-in-law, as in their household the women were not allowed to go anywhere by themselves. Upon, asking how she felt about this situation, Ria shared:

In our house...even when we go out, there is no problem. They take us along, we go along, we come along. When they go on (word unclear), even then they ask, “Do you want to come along?” They take our choice into consideration/they ask us for our wish.

In this articulation, we see the way in which Ria perceived her in-laws to be caring individuals who allowed her to have the freedom to do as she pleased, but she also described seeking the permission of her in-laws to visit her natal family and reported never being denied this permission. While these articulations convey Ria’s contentedness, they also indicate the possibility of this freedom being taken away in the future if her in-laws decided that they did not

want her to take certain actions. These instances of benevolent sexism were not perceived as problematic by the participants who were raised in a patriarchal context where they were likely to have encountered such messages time and again. As a result, these messages were likely to have been normalized by participants and begun to symbolize care, concern and even love.

In sum, women had a complicated relationship with patriarchy, which functioned as a double-edged sword in their lives, marginalizing them as well as motivating them. However, patriarchy did not operate alone, and often acted in conjunction with their lower socioeconomic status and heightened socioeconomic vulnerability to disenfranchise women with incarcerated spouses in India.

### **The Weight of Socioeconomic Disenfranchisement**

The second theme focuses on women's experiences of socioeconomic disenfranchisement, including (a) how spousal incarceration pushed women to the margins by amplifying pre-existing disadvantage, and (b) the pragmatic and emotional repercussions of women's increased socioeconomic vulnerability. The incarceration of participants' spouses often led to the loss of the sole income-generating family member while also being associated with increased costs due to the expenses associated with embroilment in the criminal justice system. As a result, participants, who were already from low socioeconomic class backgrounds, experienced compounded socioeconomic precarity. Due to the paucity of skills and literacy, participants often took up menial, low-paying jobs in the informal economy to meet basic needs of subsistence. However, participants' socioeconomic vulnerability affected not just their fulfilment of material needs but also the way they were perceived by others, and the way they viewed themselves. Their exacerbated socioeconomic vulnerability diminished their self-worth and defined the limits of their aspirations.

### *Costs of Involvement in the Criminal Justice System*

All participants spent substantial amounts of money paying lawyers who were fighting their spouses' court cases. For instance, Priya, a 22-year-old participant whose husband had been sentenced to 12 years of imprisonment said, "A lot of money has been spent. It must be more than 10, 20, 40, I don't know how much has been spent." The legal processes augmented their economic vulnerability by leading to indebtedness, as participants often had to borrow money to pay for legal fees or to bail their husbands out of prison if they were undertrials. In some cases, participants even mortgaged their assets and jewelry to afford these expenses. For instance, Rita, a 38-year-old participant, said that her family had to borrow Rs. 4 lakh (\$4,800) for her husband's bail.

Participants' economic vulnerability also translated into being unable to maintain regular contact with their partners through visitation, as visiting the prison was an expensive endeavor. Going for a prison visit meant incurring the expenditure to travel to the prison and back. Sometimes the prison was located far from wives' homes, and women had to take multiple modes of transport. Upon being asked if she was able to visit her husband during festivals and other special occasions, Shehnaaz said:

Since I don't have so much, how do I go? Because I have to look after my expenses and my children's expenses. I think that I will spend this money on the auto rickshaw which can instead be spent on my children. I don't have a choice but to think like this.

Participants were often accompanied by their children as they visited the prison, and this meant additional expenses. For example, Priya, shared, "Rs.100-Rs.200 (\$1.21 -\$2.41) are spent on going and coming back, and the kids ask for things, they say, 'We want this mummy' ...they will make demands, 'I want this mummy!' So, we have to buy." Going for visits was time

consuming due to the time it took to reach the prison and the time involved thereafter in meeting their spouse. Describing how long it took to reach and come back from the prison, Ria said:

In the morning time, we leave home at 7 in the morning. We go by bus. Then from there, we have to change 3-4 buses. We reach there by 9...the journey takes 2-3 hours. Then we go there, so we have to get a slip made. We have to stand in a queue. Then as we go further, we have to wait for another 1-2 hours...By the time we reach home, it is 3pm. We go at 7 in the morning and come back home at 3.

Due to the time it took to make a visit, participants were unable to go to work on days they were visiting prison, which meant the loss of a day's wages. Some participants feared that they could lose their job if they took too many leaves and thus were unable to visit their spouses frequently. For instance, Shaina said, "Now, sometimes my daughter goes, sometimes my son goes. I go very less because I don't get so many leaves." The court proceedings were another opportunity for participants to meet their incarcerated spouses. However, in some cases, participants were unable attend when their spouses' case was being tried due to the lack of financial wherewithal to travel to court. In addition to the expenses of prison visitation and court travel, participants also had to bear the expenses of receiving a telephone call from their spouses every day. This meant paying for the telephone call on their end as well as on their incarcerated spouses' end.

### ***Challenges of Informal Work***

Participants were engaged in informal work which was not just low-paying, but also was accompanied by physical hardship, exhaustion, and job insecurity. Due to their socialization in a patriarchal society where women's education is not a priority, most participants did not have the skills or literacy to be employed in well-paying jobs with job security. Neither had the

participants been exposed to the world of work previously due to being relegated to the domesticated sphere as a part of their conditioning in the role of homemakers. At the same time, their natal families' low socioeconomic status had resulted in lack of access to education and exposure to career-building opportunities. Furthermore, living in a growing postcolonial, capitalist, mixed economy like India, where informalization of the labor force is rampant, meant that participants could only access informal work, which offered neither job security nor benefits. Resultantly, after the loss of their husbands' income, participants were forced to engage in a range of informal work to meet their families' financial needs. Most participants did not have access to benefits including paid sick leaves, and their jobs were low paying, with none of them earning more than Rs. 15000 (\$180) a month, and most of them earning as little as Rs. 200-250 (\$2.40-\$3.00) per day. Limited wages and inadequate means of subsistence led women to resort to borrowing money to fulfill basic needs. For instance, Shahna, who currently worked as a waste picker, said that she had previously mortgaged her jewelry and borrowed about Rs. 5000 (\$60) for daily use when her income was not enough to sustain the house.

The work that most of the participants did was physically demanding and led to varied health challenges and exhaustion. For instance, Sunita, a 40-year-old participant, did manual labor at a construction site. The physically challenging nature of her job had caused numerous health-related challenges, including blisters on her hands and pain in her legs. Engaging in physically grueling work was particularly challenging for women who had pre-existing health conditions that made it difficult to work. Rita, a 38-year-old participant, had previously undergone surgery to remove a benign tumor from her leg. This made it difficult for her to bend, which was an integral part of her job as a household help who cleaned houses. In such instances, physically grueling work contributed to women's endangered physical health, proving to be

costly both in terms of healthcare and lifelong repercussions to health. However, women were often unable to take care of these medical needs due to wanting to prioritize the well-being of their children. For instance, Alisha, a 35-year-old participant, had been experiencing thyroid-related problems including tingling in her hands and feet due to physical exhaustion and stress. However, she had been unable to seek medical help due to lack of financial means as well as the desire to ensure that her sons' education was not hindered.

Oftentimes, the participants had to work long hours to barely make ends meet. Iqra, who was currently unemployed but had worked as a home-based worker in the past, stitching embroidered pieces onto women's tunics, described working long hours:

From the morning...when my kids would come back in the afternoon, I would prepare rotis and give them. Then after that I would sit again to work. Then I would prepare the evening meal and then work again at night. I used to work till 11 in the night.

At the same time, there typically was no job security or guarantee that the women would continue to be employed. For instance, Fatima, a 25-year-old participant who worked as a waste worker, said, "When it rains, then work doesn't happen." During such days, Fatima did not make a daily wage. At the same time, the closure of factories and mechanization of home-based work had also been responsible for the loss of work for some participants in the past. For instance, Shehnaaz, a 34-year-old participant, used to attach buttons to clothes but lost work as this task became mechanized. She shared:

The button work, what has happened is that now mostly people get buttons put by machines. They have stopped sending these to houses...Recently, I had gone to the factory for piece work [buttons], so they also said, "Now we are putting them on with the

help of machines. Pieces to be made by hand are not being made anywhere. These days everyone is getting them put on by machines.

Due to losing this work, Shehnaaz had been forced to resort to washing and ironing clothes of others in her neighborhood. This job was not consistent and often left her with no means of subsistence. The lack of childcare support forced some women to discontinue working or be unable to seek a job. In addition to these challenges of work, participants had to deal with exploitative employers. The women were expected to be subservient and put up with the conditions of work as they had no choice. For instance, Shaina, a 43-year-old woman who worked as a household help, reported not being able to visit her friend after work one evening as her employer had suddenly overburdened her with additional cooking and cleaning tasks for her upcoming birthday party.

### ***Ceiling of Aspirations and Self-Worth***

Participants' perceptions of themselves and their beliefs about what they could aspire to were limited by their class and gender, reflecting the impact of intersectional marginalization not just on their everyday lives but also on their inner worlds. Participants had internalized the perception held by others that they were illiterate women who did not know anything, could not be trusted, and could not do anything of value. These internalizations were the products of the verbal and nonverbal messages they had received during interactions with others around them, including family and neighbors, particularly those who were more educated. For example, Shehnaaz explained the reason for severing her relationship with her oldest sister-in-law; she shared, "I am not on speaking terms with the oldest sister-in-law because her husband thinks that my children are illiterate and thinks that we are stupid and ignorant." Comparing themselves to

others who were more educated resulted in feeling inferior and lesser than. For instance, Iqra described feeling inferior around family members who were more educated and richer than her.

Feelings of socioeconomic inferiority also resulted from interactions with actors of the criminal justice system, including policemen and lawyers who made women feel that they were ignorant, illiterate and did not deserve any information. For instance, Kavita narrated the demeaning behavior of the police each time she had gone to file a complaint against her husband after an incident of domestic violence:

Police officers behave so rudely that I cannot even tell you. They tell us “Eh, go away”

When they see someone who is educated, they listen to them. They do not listen to women like us at all. They do not know, they think that we are not literate, so how will we know what to say? They tell us to write down our complaint and then they will take our complaint. Now who do we go to write our complaint down? We are not literate.

Additionally, such perceptions were internalized through interactions with employers, who exerted dominance over the participants due to the informal, unskilled nature of their work. As Ayesha, a 23-year-old participant who worked as a household help for an educated woman, described:

An educated girl is perceived differently. And those, like us, who have just stayed at home, cannot be like that and are not seen like that. Stay at home and wash dishes, broom and sweep the house and listen to this person and listen to that person. An educated girl is very sorted. She doesn't have to listen to anyone. Even when I go to work, “Okay, do this! Do this! Do this!” How much work they make me do!

Participants' aspirations were limited by their circumstances. As women who were uneducated and from poor families, they believed that they could not afford to aspire. For

instance, Rita, a 38-year-old participant, said that she did not have any aspirations because she was illiterate. Given that they were raised in a patriarchal, collectivistic sociocultural context that taught them that their selfhood was not independent from their families, the participants had never learned to think about themselves. For instance, Kavita exclaimed that she had never been asked how she thought about herself and her future. She said, “From the beginning, I have never thought about myself much...What do I think about myself...No one has ever asked me this question, no one has ever asked. You have asked.”

Participants reported spending all their time thinking about their husbands, children, and family members. Even during their childhoods, they aspired for their marriage and familial life. These aspirations included wanting to live a simple, happy life with their families such that their basic needs of food, shelter, clothing were fulfilled; wanting to be able to afford to dress well and go out so that their recreational needs were met; wanting to be treated with respect by their spouses, and so on. A handful of women aspired for their education and career, but monetary constraints often left these aspirations unrealized. For instance, Fatima, a 25-year-old woman who was orphaned when she was an infant, said that she had always wanted to study, but she was raised by her uncle and aunt in a village where schooling was mostly private and expensive. Since her aunt and uncle did not have the money to educate her, she remained illiterate.

With respect to participants’ aspirations for the future, they had hopes for their children. They had educational and financial aspirations for their children, and they wanted their children to lead a better life than themselves. For example, Ruksar, a 28-year-old woman, said:

I want my children to study so that they do not have to do the scrap/waste work that we have to do. I want my children to do well so that their lives are good. I don’t want their lives to be like ours. I want my children to study well.

Having spent her life working for others, Ayesha, a 23-year-old participant, wanted her son to start an entrepreneurial venture so that no one asserted dominance over him. Indeed, these participants were holding jobs and earning money to ensure that their children's needs were fulfilled. Despite their monetary troubles, most participants had ensured that their children did not have to drop out from school, and some had even ensured that their children could continue receiving academic support in the form of tuitions. A few women were planning to continue working upon their husband's return so that they were able to support their growing children's education. Believing that their lives were ruined or that their futures were fixed, participants thought it was pointless to plan for their own future. For instance, Alisha, a 35-year-old participant, said, "Why should I think about myself (laughs) when I have to think about my kids' lives? My life has already gone." Their daily struggles did not leave the women with any time to think about themselves.

Some specific aspirations were articulated by a handful of participants. A few women had home-related aspirations; for instance, Shahna, a 24-year-old participant, and Ruksar, a 28-year-old participant, said that they wanted to own an apartment so that they could live comfortably and would not need to work outside. Iqra, a 36-year-old participant, wanted to own a house as she was fed up with interacting with exploitative landlords. She shared:

I dream of a house...To have a house of my own. Every other day, the landlord insults us so much, he insults us a lot...In every six months to one year, we have to vacate the house...I think that if this dream of mine gets fulfilled before I die, then I will die in peace.

Two participants held education and literacy-related aspirations. For instance, Ria, a 20-year-old participant who had completed her schooling, wanted to continue her education, and

Shaina, a 43-year-old woman, wanted to learn to read so that she could read religious texts.

Shaina described her desire in the following words, “This is my dream, I want to read the Quran.

I want to be able to read and write a bit in Hindi and Quran.”

Heightened socioeconomic vulnerability considerably affected women’s outer and inner worlds, restricting their choices, and compounding their marginalization. But women did not have a choice but to survive their circumstances, both illustrating and complicating *resilience* as embodied by wives of incarcerated spouses.

### **When Resilience Is Not a Choice**

The third and final theme focuses on the way in which participants exhibited resilience, not out of choice but out of necessity to survive socioeconomic vulnerability and patriarchal oppression. Resilience is the ability to adapt to difficult circumstances and to maintain mental well-being even while navigating hardship (Herrman et al., 2011). The women in this study demonstrated resilience by being able to adapt to spousal incarceration and the material and social hardship that followed, both with and without help from family and friends. While survival itself was an act of resilience, it was not always experienced as empowerment.

### ***Social Hardships***

Women with incarcerated spouses in this study had experienced multiple hardships, including the loss of a parent, being grievously injured, and being married to someone who was addicted to substances, among others. These hardships, when layered with the challenges they were already facing because of their husbands’ incarceration, contributed to feelings of hopelessness and disillusionment. Participants often felt alone or isolated due to complete lack of support or a gradual withdrawal of support over the course of a prolonged period of spousal incarceration. The loss of support made women feel that they could not trust anyone, which

shaped how they viewed the world. Many participants said that they had changed over time from being an optimist to a pessimist. Their lack of support, coupled with experiencing stigmatization and prejudicial treatment, made them feel misunderstood and isolated.

The internalization of the belief that others around them did not care about their distress and that no one would support them led these women to distance themselves from the world. At the same time, fears of being judged if someone were to find out about their spousal incarceration, attracting unwanted attention or being misunderstood by those around them led them to maintain secrecy about spousal incarceration. Anticipatory stigmatization led to voluntary social isolation. Not wanting to feel isolated or different led women to not attend weddings or visit relatives. For example, Iqra's shared, "Everyone keeps saying, 'Iqra never comes anywhere, never comes anywhere.' If I don't feel like it, then how do I go anywhere? And even around everyone I feel strange, like I am different from everyone else." At the same time, participants were also actively alienated by relatives and loved ones who did not want to be associated with them, adding to their social isolation.

### ***Being Resourceful and Learning the Skills to Survive***

Despite the financial, social, and mental strife that enveloped them, participants were able to persist. They demonstrated resilience by enduring suffering for a crime they did not commit, as aptly captured by Iqra, who shared, "They commit the crime, they do wrong, but we suffer. We have suffered. He has lived alone in the prison, but I have endured everything along with my four kids. We have done the time."

Participants demonstrated resourcefulness by consistently seeking out resources and support to cope with their situation. They were able to become aware of the processes and procedures of the criminal justice system, despite limited access to legal information due to

patriarchal gatekeeping. For some participants, who had grown up in a small village, being able to persist meant being able to navigate a big, unfamiliar city all by themselves. The National Capital Territory of Delhi was many times bigger in terms of size and population than the villages where they had grown up, which was overwhelming. They had to navigate the difference between village life and city life as well as village culture and city culture. For instance, Iqra said:

How would a person from a village know so much? Here...after he went to prison, I found out what is police like, what is a prison like, about the courts...when I started going from here. I didn't even know about hospitals...So then later, slowly, slowly I have learned everything.

Similarly, Alisha, a 35-year-old participant who had grown up in the village, talked about how she stepped out of the house for the very first time after her husband's incarceration to be able to support her family:

Going outside, when I left the house and went outside, I learned where this road goes. I had no idea if this road goes to the jungle or where it goes. Then I went outside, I had to feed my kids.

Being able to survive their challenging circumstances meant that participants had to learn a plethora of new skills, including how to find a job; interact with employers; access public transportation; interact with landlords; access non-governmental support; make prison visits; interact with lawyers, police officers, and prison staff; attend parent-teacher meetings; engage with the school system; and go out to buy groceries and other house supplies. For instance, Anju shared how she had asked the principal of her younger daughter's school for a fee concession:

[I said,] “Sir, my daughter has come first, so sir, this school has been opened by an NGO. So please provide some [monetary] help for my daughter.” So, he said, “Child, I have told this to the people above me. If there is anything that can be done for your children, I will definitely do it.”

Participants shouldered the new role of being a breadwinner even though most of them had never worked prior to spousal incarceration or possessed the literacy or vocational skills to easily find employment. In addition to these pragmatic skills, these women were able to learn to stand up for themselves and to maintain their calm despite being faced with injustice. Their desire to ensure that their children were cared for and had a secure future was the primary motivation that kept them going. Participants demonstrated strength by not just surviving the outside world, but by being able to withstand and sometimes even stand up to abusive partners. For instance, Ayesha, a 23-year-old participant who used to tolerate violence out of fear, was eventually able to fight back. Similarly, Shaina, a 43-year-old participant, reported not feeling afraid of her husband anymore. Shahna, a 24-year-old participant, was able to respond and defend herself each time her husband falsely accused her of cheating on him. In each of these instances, participants credited their newfound courage to their financial self-sufficiency. This is demonstrated aptly by Shaina, who said, “I used to be very scared...Now I don’t feel scared...Now I earn (says with a laugh)!”

### ***Resilient but Not Empowered***

The constant interactions with the outside world due to the necessities of survival were often associated with a reduced fear of the outside world and enhanced mobility. While this was viewed as empowering by a few women, most women did not view it as such. Rather, participants often said that they that they did not have a choice but to be courageous. Their

circumstances were such that they *had* to be brave to survive. Even if they felt afraid, nervous, or unwilling to face the world and undertake interactions that were anxiety provoking, they did it out of compulsion. They knew that they had to earn to be able to live, so they put their anxieties and fears aside in the pursuit of survival. Thus, what may be viewed as brave, courageous, and resilient by the rest of the world, was framed as simply a necessity of survival by the participants. For instance, upon being asked where her courage came from, Ayesha said, “When a problem comes in front of us, then courage comes by itself...I just got courage. Now, no one is with me, I am alone, so I will have to do everything alone.”

At the same time, resilience often came at a steep cost. These costs included exhaustion, health-related ailments, feelings of disillusionment, and hopelessness. The physical health challenges were often the result of bearing the burden of physically exhausting work, as previously discussed. However, the emotional costs of being resilient cannot be overemphasized. Showing the courage to survive insurmountable hardships meant constantly grappling with stress and worry. This emotional distress translated into headaches, sleeplessness, crying spells, loss of appetite, and loss of the ability to derive joy or pleasure from daily life. At the same time, participants reported feeling resentful and bitter about living through such hardship. As Ruksar shared, “When my heart sours and I start feeling resentful, then I lock myself in my house and keep crying.”

### ***Learning by Observing***

Participants were able to be resilient by observing others cope with similar challenges. Learning by observing others, particularly others who were similar to them in terms of their social location, was a crucial way that women learned to navigate various institutional actors and interactions. While their physical location was a disadvantage in terms of overall access to

resources and services, it was an advantage in terms of offering up relatable models who, due to their exposure to the actors and networks of the criminal justice system, were able to be of help and support.

Most participants were located in crime-prone neighborhoods, where brushes with the criminal justice system were common. While the women themselves had never been exposed to the criminal justice system, their physical location in such neighborhoods enabled them to have neighbors and friends who could accompany them to the police station, prison, and meetings with lawyers. This provided participants with the opportunity to have models around them that they could observe and learn from. For instance, Ayesha shared that she did not have to visit the prison to meet her spouse for the first time unaccompanied. She said, “In the beginning I was scared, but with me there was a woman whose man was also locked up along with my man. The first time, I had not gone alone.” Similarly, Fatima described the way someone from her neighborhood helped her speak with a lawyer: “I would go with someone who stays near us because even her husband was in prison. Her mother was also in prison... So I went with her, she made me talk to the lawyer.”

Furthermore, they learned how to interact with employers by observing other coworkers navigate these interactions. Participants learned how to perform their jobs by observing their coworkers undertake similar work. Similarly, interactions with other institutions, including children’s teachers during parent-teacher conferences, were made easier by observing other parents engage in such interactions. Shaina, a 43-year-old participant, shared:

I would stand quietly and see how other parents talk. First, I stand completely at the back.

Everyone goes one by one, I stand like this and observe everyone, how they are talking.

The teacher first tells that the kid is good in this, not good in this, so and so. So, they

explain this way. Then how the kids' mother responds. So, like this, I first observe. Then I go and then I...That's how I learn and then I try. Like this.

### ***Support Through Solidarity and Friendships***

Friendships with women from similar backgrounds and social locations acted as a source of support and solidarity. Being around other women who had experienced similar adversities helped women feel understood. A few participants reported becoming friends with other women who would come for visitation due to how similar their lives were. For example, Iqra shared, "A lot of them were very good and even became my friends, like the other women who would come there for visitation."

Female friendships emerged as particularly important since these women were conditioned to view friendships between men and women as unacceptable. Due to the patriarchal assumption that friendships between men and women cannot be platonic, women were very careful to not be friends with men. Instead, women sought emotional support in other women. Crying together was a form of coping with distress. At the same time, female friendships emerged as one of the few spaces where women felt happy enough to want to laugh. Shaina, a 43-year-old participant, shared how her friend was a source of comfort and joy, stating, "I share my happiness and sadness with her...I don't have anyone else. I share all my sadness and happiness with her because our childhoods have been spent together..." Chatting and spending time with female friends was an important form of recreation for women. Furthermore, female friendships played an important role in motivating women to keep persisting in difficult circumstances. Ayesha, a 23-year-old participant, described that she got courage by talking to her friends. She said, "I go to work, then I have friends. I talk to them...Everyone helps me understand and explains to me. Someone says something, someone says something. So, I keep

everyone's words in my mind." For wives with incarcerated spouses, female friendships were experienced as an important source of comfort, solidarity, and strength.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This study documented the stories of women experiencing spousal incarceration in India. Whereas some women felt ambivalent but continued to hang on to their marriages, others were unconditionally devoted to their husbands, and others became independent of their relationships but experienced disillusionment. The results of this study emphasized the complicated, multidimensional relationship that women shared with patriarchy, whereby it functioned as an ideological system that not just oppressed them but also imbued them with a sense of purpose. Spousal incarceration was found to exacerbate women's socioeconomic vulnerability and define the limits of their self-worth and aspirations. Despite these insurmountable hardships, participants demonstrated resilience by continuing to survive, although resilience did not necessarily translate into feeling empowered and often came at a steep cost.

In this chapter, I first briefly identify the ways in which the present study mirrored previous research. Second, I discuss how the findings of this study can be better understood through the lenses of relevant theoretical concepts, including *feminist and welfare agency*, *ambiguous loss*, *disenfranchised grief*, and *symbolic interactionism*. Third, I critically examine and problematize resilience as understood in the context of this study and in the literature more broadly. Fourth, I discuss the absence of findings with respect to caste and religion. Finally, I propose and discuss directions for future research.

### Similarities with Previous Research

In numerous ways, the findings of this study are consistent with research that has been conducted with families of the incarcerated in the Global North. The present study supports the finding that familial incarceration contributes to economic inequality by exacerbating the economic strife experienced by the most vulnerable sections of society (Arditti et al., 2003;

Braman, 2004). Specifically, this study demonstrates ways in which women who are from lower caste, minoritized religious backgrounds, and lower socioeconomic backgrounds experience the loss of the sole breadwinner to incarceration. This loss pushes them into low paying, informal work, thereby compounding their disadvantage. Furthermore, spousal incarceration compounds their disadvantage through social hardship. Consistent with previous research, women in this study experienced stigma as well as blame for their spouse's incarceration, being perceived as guilty by association (Bandelet 2014; Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2008; Condry, 2006).

Second, akin to previous research (Codd, 2007), the present study illustrates how, upon the incarceration of a male family member, female relatives shoulder the burden of caregiving, adding to gendered burden of care-work within families. Specifically, incarceration augments mother-work of female partners, leading them to perform *prison-motherwork* (Arditti et al., 2021), or the “paid and unpaid labor that mothers on the margins do to support their families and foster their children's survival” during paternal incarceration (Arditti et al., 2021, p. 146).

Third, resonant with Comfort (2008)'s findings, these findings support that women's relationship with the carceral institution is an ambivalent one. This institution can act as both an ally (e.g., by providing rehabilitation for substance use problems of incarcerated partners, often being the only affordable intervention that these marginalized families could access) and as an adversary (e.g., by contributing to women's stress and concern for their partners' well-being and causing experiences of humiliation for themselves). Consistent with Comfort (2008, p.13)'s findings, women in this study experienced *secondary prisonization* as the prison influenced their rhythms and routines through various mediums of contact. During prison visits, wives themselves were treated as convicts, experiencing similar search processes, intrusions of privacy, and mistreatments as their incarcerated spouses (Boppre et al., 2022). At the same time,

maintaining contact, particularly through visitation, with the incarcerated partner, was found to be time consuming, challenging, and expensive, as emphasized by a host of previous scholarly investigations (Arditti, 2012; Boppre et al., 2022).

With respect to relational maintenance, the present study mirrors findings of previous research in multiple ways. Consistent with previous work, I observed that incarceration could lead women to feel alone and yearn for their incarcerated partners (De Claire et al., 2020; Harman et al., 2007). In cases where the incarcerated partners are involved in the “fast life,” periods of incarceration may make women feel hopeful about the possibility of their partners’ reformation (De Claire et al., 2020), particularly when partners are more affectionate behind bars, leading women to revise their relationship narratives and idolize their partners during periods of separation (Comfort, 2008). As found by Nickels (2020), the present study reveals that women engage in a range of behaviors to maintain feelings of connection with their incarcerated spouses, including engaging in positive thinking, romanticizing the reunion with their spouses post incarceration, reminiscing about past memories, and holding onto photographs and letters. While previous research has found that pre-incarceration relationship quality determines relationship quality during reentry (Dwyer Emory, 2022; La Vigne et al., 2005; Mowen & Visher, 2016), the present study suggests that pre-incarceration relationship quality may affect the way the romantic relationship is perceived by non-incarcerated partners during the period of incarceration.

### **Theoretical Applications**

With an understanding of how the findings of this study align with key insights from previous research, I now discuss how the findings of this study can be better understood through the lenses of relevant theoretical concepts. Specifically, I put the study’s findings in dialogue

with four conceptual frameworks: *feminist and welfare agency*, *ambiguous loss*, *disenfranchised grief*, and *symbolic interactionism*.

### **Feminist and Welfare Agency**

First, findings from the present study are elevated in meaning when considered alongside Khader's (2014; 2016; 2020) theorizing on feminist agency and welfare agency. Specifically, these findings provide evidence that women's resourcefulness, resilience, and independence do not always translate into recognizing unjust gender norms—norms that relegate women to inferior positions within their own homes and families. Khader's (2014) theorization on agency, autonomy, and empowerment helps examine and understand these findings. Khader distinguishes between *feminist agency* and *welfare agency*. *Feminist agency* refers to the ability to want and ask for egalitarian gender relations, whereas *welfare agency* refers to knowing how to procure the goods and services needed for one's well-being and being able to act accordingly (Khader, 2014). Thus, it follows that women can be autonomous and agentic while still internalizing and adhering to misogynistic gender norms. This occurs because conformity to patriarchy is rewarded, and in an unjust social structure, internalizing and conforming to sexist norms may be the only way to advance one's well-being. Indeed, results from the present study support the notion that women are rewarded by conforming to patriarchal ideals of what constitutes a "good woman" who puts her family first in all circumstances. In fact, opposing these norms can endanger her well-being. As Khader (2020) explains:

We can think of oppressed agents as facing a dilemma with two prongs: choose well-being through self-subordination or choose opposition to oppression through self-sacrifice. However, prescribing that oppressed agents act as though they could access well-being without self-subordination amounts to asking them to court self-harm.

Because of the tragic structure of oppressed agents' options, flouting oppressive norms often means exposing oneself to penalties. (p. 512)

Thus, survival requires women to be agentic and resourceful, but to not go so far as to advocate for equal gender relationships, which could cut them off from needed resources and endanger their survival. Resilience in conditions of precarity, as experienced by these women, who are among the most oppressed agents, necessitates conformity. In fact, it would not just be unreasonable but also harmful to expect these women to demonstrate feminist agency in such oppressive circumstances. Their conformity to patriarchal norms can be framed as *self-interested adaptations* to a tragic, unfair, and deeply oppressive social structure (Khader, 2020).

Khader draws a distinction between individual well-being and empowerment, whereby the latter is concerned with a group's position with respect to the social structure and cannot be achieved merely by individual action. This conceptualization of *empowerment* helps explain why women of incarcerated spouses in India, although they are surviving extraordinary circumstances, are unlikely to report *feeling empowered*. Referring to autonomy as self-governance or being motivated by one's own interests and values, Khader (2016) explains that autonomy is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for empowerment. Empowerment requires a reformed, just social order and can only be achieved through collective action. While it would help if women were able to reflect on and be conscious of the ways in which unequal norms harmed them, such consciousness would not change the pre-existing social relations (Khader, 2016; 2020).

Consistent with research conducted in U.S., my findings suggest that spousal incarceration leads women in India to seek employment, become financially independent, and interact with the criminal justice system, all of which can bolster women's confidence (Harman

et al., 2007; Kotova, 2018; Moerings, 1992). However, while financial independence may yield benefits, employment does not have as much of a transformative impact for the women as anticipated. Certainly, employment does not translate into empowerment. This finding can be understood using the framework of *feminization of labor* and Khader's interrogation of the link between employment and empowerment. In a talk she presented on an ABC podcast, *Can a goat change a woman's life* (Raine, 2018), Khader questions the conflation of employment with empowerment. She explains that, while women are employed and make money outside their homes, it does not reduce the invisible labor they continue to perform at home. Furthermore, due to the feminization of labor (Akorsu, 2016), the work that women perform outside the home often is exploitative, poorly compensated, and accompanied by precarity and poor working conditions. The limited incomes women earn are often utilized to take care of the household expenses and children's expenses, instead of being considered women's personal incomes, as also found in the present study. Furthermore, women's employment substantially increases the amount of work they do while not increasing how much they make, and often leaving them with reduced time and ability to take care of their own health and well-being.

Finally, patriarchy and lower socioeconomic class operate together so as to further sever the relationship between employment and empowerment. Patriarchal ideology is associated with the belief that engaging in working class jobs compromises the purity and moral goodness of women. Being able to stay at home and work almost symbolizes a higher-class status, one that is not available to working class women. It is unsurprising then, that some women in this study aspired to be able to stay at home instead of engaging in back-breaking work outside. Khader's distinction between welfare and feminist agency helps acknowledge the resourcefulness demonstrated by the women in this study while being cognizant of the pragmatic constraints on

their agency. At the same time, this theorization helps guard against the romanticization or glorification of exploitative informal work.

### **Ambiguous Loss**

Second, the experiences of women of incarcerated spouses can be better understood through the lens of ambiguous loss. *Ambiguous loss*, coined by Pauline Boss, describes a loss that is unclear and ambiguous due to an incongruence between physical and psychological presence (Boss, 1999; Boss, 2016). For example, an ambiguous loss can occur if a loved one is psychologically absent but physically present, as in a family member who has dementia and is not the person they used to be. An ambiguous loss also can occur if a loved one is physically absent but psychologically present, as in a family member of the armed forces who is missing in action. Ambiguous losses complicate the grieving process due to the inability to experience finality, completeness, closure, or resolution with respect to one's loss.

The findings of this study exhibit the relevance of ambiguous loss to the intimate partner relationship experiences of wives of incarcerated men in India. Indeed, because incarceration is likely to involve someone's physical absence coupled with their psychological presence, all people with incarcerated partners are likely to experience ambiguous loss in some form. For women in Cluster A (*Ambivalent but Hanging On*), their partners often were emotionally present *only when* they were physically absent, but each time they were physically present (e.g., during periods of bail), they were emotionally absent due to the influence of substances and criminality. Thus, during these periods of physical presence, women had to contend and cope with their partners' emotional absence. The framework of ambiguous loss captures the pain these women endure as they can never feel the absolute presence of their partners without also having to deal with their absence in some form. For other women experiencing spousal incarceration, such as

the women in Cluster B (*Unconditionally Devoted*), their partners' emotional presence during periods of incarceration can be a reminder of their physical absence. As a result, these women constantly yearn for their partners' return. Moments when they experience their psychological presence are a staunch reminder of the heartbreak that they have experienced due to involuntary separation. Furthermore, not knowing if and when their partners would be released, in cases of sentences of life imprisonment, further add to the ambiguity of the loss that women must contend with.

Maintaining a relationship with a spouse who is incarcerated means that women must hold conflicting ideas of presence and absence of their partners at the same time, as women can never enjoy the physical and emotional presence of their partners simultaneously. Even during home visits, women are cognizant of the impending separation, causing them to devote their emotional resources to prepare for the loss of their partners' physical presence. At the same time, daily phone calls with their partners establish their psychological presence while making their physical absence even more palpable. For instance, reminiscing about their partners and holding onto their memories in the form of letters and photographs establishes their psychological presence in women's homes and hearts while also serving as a reminder of their physical absence. Women have to process their partners' loss while also being cognizant of their presence and preparing for the eventual return. Resultantly, they are unable to experience the finality of loss and are often left in an in-between, limbo state, holding on to their partners' presence while also mourning their absence at the same time.

### **Disenfranchised Grief**

The findings of the current study also can be better understood through the lens of disenfranchised grief. *Disenfranchised grief* was coined by Doka (1989) to refer to grief that is

experienced upon going through a loss that is socially unacceptable and cannot be mourned publicly. According to Doka, disenfranchised grief can occur if the loss that is being experienced is not socially viewed as a loss. For instance, the loss of an unborn child, the loss of a pet animal, loss of one's best friend or the loss of a family member to suicide have been discussed as losses that lead to disenfranchised grief due to the lack of social recognition of these losses (Doka, 1999). Similarly, the loss of a family member to incarceration tends to not be a socially recognized or validated loss, due to stigma associated with incarceration and the social disapproval and disavowal of the incarcerated person. Spousal incarceration tends to not garner much sympathy to the loved ones affected by this event. As Arditti (2012) notes, unlike the death or separation from one's husband due to other circumstances, prison widows do not receive any form of formal or informal support, for "*there are no casseroles brought to the house for the 'prison widow'*" (p. 112).

Disenfranchised grief is a befitting framework to conceptualize the isolated grieving experience of the women in the present study, who do not receive permission to openly grieve their husbands' incarceration, particularly if husbands are perceived as culpable or guilty (e.g., participants in Cluster A). The participants' experiences mirror Corr (2002)'s proposition that communities could deny social recognition to a disenfranchised loss through various ways including words and actions. Women receive verbal criticism and rebuke from loved ones upon crying for their husbands. They are pressured to not just curtail the expression but even the experience of their sorrow on being separated from their spouses. This disenfranchisement contributes to women's social isolation, forcing them to deal with their grief on their own. At the same time, the anticipation of stigmatization may force women to conceal their husbands' incarceration in their neighborhood. This secrecy can contribute to the inability to openly express

sadness, while also being a reminder of the lack of social recognition of the loss of one's spouse to incarceration.

### **Symbolic Interactionism**

According to symbolic interactionism, the meanings that individuals make of their experiences, which are formed within social interactions, determine their actions and their worldview (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Given that the present study was framed using this theoretical framework, it is unsurprising that this theoretical framework offers multiple concepts that are applicable to the present study. In this section, I discuss some concepts that were particularly relevant.

With respect to their intimate partnerships, the meanings that people ascribe to their partners' actions are instrumental in determining their experience of their intimate partnership in the present as well as their hopes for the future (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Applied to the present study, women in Cluster A appeared to make meaning of their spouses' engagement in the fast life of criminality and substance use by constructing two different identities of the husbands: an identity of them as a loving spouse capable of being better, and an identity of them as an addict who is a petty, violent offender. Construction of these twin identities may help women not hold their husbands accountable and make peace with their repeated incarcerations, such that they can instead blame the substances for their husbands' behavior. At the same time, this twin identity construction may help women persist in their marriages by creating a distance between the husbands they love and the men their husbands turn into once they are under the influence of substances.

Women in Cluster B engaged in different forms of meaning-making; they perceived their incarcerated husbands as telepathic, unconditional lovers due to their favorable experiences with

their husbands before and during incarceration. This identity construction may motivate women to maintain their marriages. On the other hand, negative experiences with incarcerated spouses can lead women to build a perception of their husbands as unreliable, uncaring, and irresponsible spouses, as evidenced in the meaning-making of participants in Cluster C. This identity construction may help women detach themselves from their husbands.

The importance that women experiencing spousal incarceration in India attach to their identity of being mothers can be explained using the structural symbolic concept of *identity salience* (Stryker, 1968). As per this concept, individuals hold multiple identities, and these identities are organized in the order of importance. The more salient a particular identity is to an individual, the more determined the individual will be to fulfill the expectations associated with it. The salience attached by Indian women to their identity as mothers explains their devotion to this role; indeed, the more salient a particular identity is, the more likely it is to be invoked by the individual. Consistent with this principle, the mothers ( $n = 13$ ) in the present study invoked their identity as mothers repeatedly during their interactions with the interviewer. Symbolic interactionism holds that the overarching context plays a role in determining identity salience by influencing what one has to lose if one were to not prioritize that specific identity (Stryker, 1968). In this context, given that women's worth is assessed based on how well they perform their duties as wives and mothers, it would be justified to assume that women would have a lot to lose upon not giving primacy to these identities.

### ***Marital Paradigm Theory***

*Marital paradigm theory*, with its roots in symbolic interactionism, offers another useful lens for understanding the experiences of wives of incarcerated spouses in India, particularly with regard women's persistence within their marriage (Willoughby et al., 2015). According to

marital paradigm theory, people possess marital values which determine marital actions, these marital values correspond to six interlinked dimensions: *marital context*, *marital timing*, *marital salience*, *marital centrality*, *marital permanence*, and *marital processes*. Together, these concepts help explain women's decisions to stay in their marriage despite overwhelming marital hardship.

The dimension of *marital context* includes beliefs about the relational, cultural, and individual context in which marriages take place (Willoughby et al., 2015). One's personal readiness and the process through which one finds a spouse are subsumed within this dimension. Indian women, including women experiencing spousal incarceration in India are conditioned to believe that marriage is arranged by one's family and the person who is being married does not need to have a say in it. Relatedly, the dimension of *marital timing* includes beliefs about the timing of marriage as well as the duration for which a person should know one's partner before marriage (Willoughby et al., 2015). With respect to this dimension, Indian women experiencing spousal incarceration may believe that women marry sooner than later, and the age of marriage is determined by their families. Thus, nine of the participants were married off when they were younger than 18 years of age while two got married when they were merely 18. Furthermore, Indian women are conditioned to believe that courtship is not necessary for marriage.

The dimension of *marital processes* includes beliefs about the adjustment that a marriage requires (Willoughby et al., 2015). Indian women experiencing spousal incarceration believe that marriage requires a lot of adjustment on the part of the woman. Women are supposed to live as per the rules of the house they are married into. The dimension of *marital permanence*, concerned with the beliefs about commitment to marriage and the conditions under which marriage could be ended, is helpful in explaining women's commitment to marriage

(Willoughby et al., 2015). Participants in this study viewed marriage as a lasting commitment. Finally, the dimensions of *marital salience* and *marital centrality* focus on the importance of marriage and on the role of being a spouse (Willoughby et al., 2015). Indian women are raised with the understanding that marriage is the most important event in women's lives. They place a lot of importance on being married and on the role of a wife. These dimensions help explain why Indian women's separation from their husbands and/or change in who their husbands are due to spousal incarceration may be viewed as the ultimate loss by them.

### **Problematizing Resilience**

Participants of the present study demonstrated the ability to cope with and adapt to grave adversity. Previous research makes a distinction between *coping* and *resilience*, emphasizing that individuals can be called resilient only when they do not just survive adversity but also experience positive change, growth, and transformation, almost akin to *bouncing forward* (Holtorf, 2018). However, I propose that the act of survival of the participants in this study itself counts as resilience. They were able to survive extraordinary hardships which they had never been prepared for or socialized to manage. Despite unpreparedness, they faced hardships that were multifold, encompassing financial, emotional, and social challenges all at once. Participants exhibited what Masten (2014) calls *ordinary magic*, or the ability to deal with extraordinary challenges with or without the help of ordinary, commonplace processes and resources. Their ability to learn more about themselves through this hardship, become open-minded, and learn pragmatic skills reflects their grit, persistence, and growth, which can be claimed as demonstrative of bouncing forward.

While the participants' resilience deserves acknowledgement, it is important to also be critical of the unjust social structures that force women to be resilient (Anderson, 2019). For

example, the unjust criminalization of the poor and the minoritized is responsible for familial incarceration in the first place. Responsibility also lies with the patriarchal ideological underpinnings of their contextual milieu which did not provide them with the skills, education, or opportunities to improve their financial circumstances. Thus, acknowledging women's resilience, grit, and determination in this study should not by any means be considered an endorsement or acceptance of the oppressive societal structures that necessitate their ordinary magic.

Just as women's grit and perseverance deserve recognition, so do the steep costs that accompany their resilience. The steep cost of resilience has been examined in the context of African American families exposed to structural inequities, socioeconomic strife, and high-risk contexts (Bryant et al., 2022). Studies indicate that exposure to challenging circumstances during childhood impact physical health outcomes of Black Americans well into adulthood, due to the cumulative impact of chronic stress (Brody et al., 2013; Miller et al., 2016). The physical costs of resilience, resulting not just from stressors but also strategies adopted to manage stressors, have been found to include heightened risk of a range of illnesses including carcinogenesis, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease (Bryant et al., 2022; Geronimus et al., 2010). These findings echo findings from the current study and should sound the alarm for the likelihood of long-term health challenges that these participants could potentially encounter due to their adaptation to prolonged hardships.

### **The Missing Case of Caste and Religion**

The current study was designed with the hope of finding ways in which being lower caste and/or being Muslim affected women's lived experiences. However, I was unable to make any robust claims about the role of caste or religion in women's narratives. A few participants emphasized that caste or religion did not influence their experiences with the carceral institution.

Otherwise, participants had very little to say about if and how these elements had shaped their journeys. As I reflect on the reasons behind this surprising finding, there are many possibilities that come to mind, which I discuss and interrogate in this section. The objective behind this interrogation is to steer away from mistakenly producing a ‘casteless’ or ‘religion-less’ subject. I do not in any way wish to advance the problematic notion that caste system is not a contemporary reality or that caste or religion did not play a role in contributing to the injustices that participants experienced (Dixit, 2023).

Being unable to uncover findings of note with respect to caste and religion could be related to my positionality as an upper caste researcher, the current Indian sociopolitical climate, as well as the ways in which caste and religious identity operate to create oppression. First, it is important to acknowledge that as a Hindu upper caste researcher, the knowledge I produce is not neutral or ‘caste-less’ (Dixit, 2023). My ways of knowing are influenced by my identity as an upper caste Hindu. My status as the ‘knower,’ ‘the researcher,’ ‘the expert’ is directly linked to my upper caste Hindu status. My caste and religious privilege have granted me access to resources, opportunities, and exposure. At the same time, my lived experiences as an upper caste Hindu leave me with no comprehension of what it means to live as a lower caste or a Muslim woman in India. These limitations are likely to have influenced my inability to ask questions that could provide visibility to the reality of caste-based and religious oppression among the participants of the study. My dominant identities contributed to discomfort and unease in broaching the subject of caste or religion in interactions with participants. As Dixit (2023, p.7) says, “What is absent in researcher experiences is likely to be omitted, misrepresented, or undertheorized in our work, regardless of our epistemological leanings.” Furthermore, given that

no substantive findings were evident to me, I did not want to make any ill-informed, universal generalizations about 'lower caste women' (Dixit, 2023).

At the same time, interacting with an upper caste Hindu researcher is likely to have influenced the responses of the participants, due to self-surveillance. This is likely given the current sociopolitical climate whereby the policing, surveillance, incarceration, and persecution of minoritized individuals, particularly Muslims, Dalits and indigenous communities has considerably increased (Soundararajan, 2022). In such a threatening political climate, due to concerns about their safety, participants are likely to have sanitized their narratives and refrained from making risky disclosures.

Being unable to directly see the role of caste and religion could also be the product of the insidious and indirect ways in which these oppressions operate that makes it difficult to pinpoint their role. Yet, I would claim that these oppressions are comparable to the air we breathe, which is unseen yet omnipresent. In the case of the present study, caste and religion could have played a role indirectly through numerous factors including geographical location, incarceration status, socioeconomic status and so on. It is likely that the participants experienced spousal incarceration due to their caste and religious identities (Soundararajan, 2022). The participants lived in peripheral and ghettoized areas, on the margins of the city. Their neighborhoods primarily housed other lower caste or Muslim individuals. These neighborhoods segregated them from the rest of society and were often less developed, with limited access to resources and greater likelihood of incarceration and criminal involvement of their spouses. It is possible that participants had not experienced the role of religion or caste due to being situated in such neighborhoods with a predominantly Muslim and/or lower caste population. Caste and religion indirectly influenced participants' lived experiences by influencing their socioeconomic status,

through limiting education and employment opportunities. For instance, it is a well-known fact that lower caste women are often employed in poorly paid, precarious jobs in the informal sector, as was evident in the present study (Wadekar, 2019).

It is also important to remember that caste is not a monolith. *Lower caste* is an umbrella term for a diverse group of castes which have varied relationships with one another (Dixit, 2023). This could have influenced the role of caste in women's experiences. For example, in one instance, a participant's spouse was incarcerated due to the conflict of their specific subcaste with another subcaste, and preferential police support was given to the opposing subcaste. However, due to my ignorance about the interrelationships between various subcastes in the region, it was difficult to comprehend or make any claims of caste-related impact from this instance.

The influence of caste and religion-based oppression on participants' lives could have been minimized by participants due to their misplaced responsibility on themselves to be a good minority. This was articulated by Iqra who, when asked if being a Muslim woman contributed to prejudicial treatment by the carceral institution, said, "No, this is also dependent on us right? If we talk rudely with someone then that person will also talk rudely with us. If we treat others with respect, then they will also treat us with respect." This response is consistent with previous research which has indicated that minoritized groups often minimize discrimination and blame themselves so as to feel that they are in control of how they are treated, as well as due to internalization of prejudice (Ruggiero & Taylor, 1997; Alexis et al., 2007).

The absence of caste and religion from the results of this study are likely to have been the result of a complex array of factors, not limited to but heavily influenced by my positionality as an upper caste Hindu researcher. This absence does not indicate that caste and religion do not

influence the lived experiences of women who experience spousal incarceration but rather emphasizes the need for future research which is better equipped to uncover the processes through which caste and religion operate in these women's lives.

### **Future Directions**

The present study invites numerous directions for future research. Ethnographic research that includes spending time near the visiting area of the prison complex as well as within the communities where women live would help in developing a deeper understanding of the ways in which spousal incarceration affects women's lives. Given the erratic and unpredictable nature of women's lives and the demands of daily wage work, future research should utilize telephonic interviews as the key medium of data collection. Doing so may allow the formation of a closer relationship with research participants and enable gathering richer data through serial interviewing. Conducting life history interviews with participants may be helpful in developing a deeper understanding of these women's whole lives and life stories.

Research studies should endeavor to specifically examine the role of caste in incarceration as well as the lived experiences of women whose husbands are incarcerated. Such research should be framed from the lens of caste rather than incarceration and should include interviews with Dalit academics as well as theorists as key informants. Doing so would be helpful in framing the research methodology in ways that help uncover the role of caste more directly. Similar research should be undertaken with respect to the role of religion. Specifically examining the experiences of women whose husbands have been incarcerated for terrorism-related charges (e.g. those incarcerated under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967, and the Prevention of Terrorism Act, 2002) would be helpful in studying the role of religion.

Future research should examine the spousal relationship through a dyadic perspective by including women as well as their incarcerated spouses. Studies should specifically examine the experiences of women whose spouses are undertrials and those whose spouses are convicted prisoners, as these lived experiences are likely to be markedly different due to the uncertainty that lack of prison conviction brings to the life of the family. Research with women who have separated or divorced men subsequent to their incarceration would be helpful in understanding the impact of incarceration on the spousal relationship and the experience of dissolving the marital union during or after spousal incarceration.

Finally, quantitative research that focuses on families of incarcerated men and includes a larger subset of the population would be helpful in building evidence of the need for policy and programming that considers the needs of this population. Studies that use tools to compute numerical estimates of the costs of involvement in the criminal justice system would go a long way in emphasizing the ways in which incarceration compounds socioeconomic disadvantage. Quantitative research also could include survey methods to examine women's experiences with various actors of the criminal justice system, including lawyers, police officers, and prison staff.

### **Conclusion**

Guided by intersectional feminism and symbolic interactionism, this narrative analysis aimed to understand to stories of women with incarcerated spouses in India, including the thematic content of those stories, how women make meaning of their stories, and the embeddedness of their stories within larger systems of privilege and oppression. My findings shed light on the socioeconomic, emotional, and social hardships that characterized women's lived experiences of spousal incarceration in India. While there was great variability in women's experiences of being married to incarcerated men, internalization of patriarchal beliefs and/or

love for their incarcerated spouses led women to maintain their marriage. Women showed immense grit despite experiencing an ambiguous loss that they did not have the permission to openly grieve, while at the same time being forced to engage in exploitative informal work. Women demonstrated agency in being able to secure the resources their families needed, but their survival under conditions of precarity in an oppressive social order necessitated self-subordination. Prioritizing the well-being of their children and families meant that women often did not have the resources to prioritize their own mental and physical health. Thus, grave structural injustices that forced women to be resilient came at the cost of their well-being.

While the study did not uncover the explicit ways in caste and religion shaped women's experiences, it points to the need for future scholarly endeavors that examine these marginalizing identities, through collaborations with Dalit and Muslim academics. Further, the present study highlights the need to critically examine the concepts of agency, empowerment, and resilience from the standpoint of the most marginalized. Finally, and most crucially, the study emphasizes the need to foreground voices of women who experience spousal incarceration, so as to create visibility and room for their overlooked perspectives in policy and interventions.

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## **Appendix A: Interview Guide**

- *Note that this interview guide will be used flexibility. Not all questions will be asked of all participants or in the same order. Some of the questions may sound repetitive; the purpose of that is to ensure that the researcher has access to different ways of getting at the question.*
- *Questions marked with an asterisk (\*) are research questions. They are included for the purposes of structuring the protocol, but they will not be asked of research participants.*

### **RQ: What does it mean to be a wife of an incarcerated man?**

#### **a). What does it mean on a practical level to be a wife of an incarcerated man?**

*Navigating institutional structures (legal system, carceral institution) and maintaining contact with incarcerated husband*

1. Tell me the story of your husband's incarceration.

Follow up prompts:

What happened?

What has that meant for your family's situation?

How has life changed for you and your family since then?

What are the stories that you tell others about this incident?

How has this changed your relationships with others in the neighborhood?

What are the stories that people around you, narrate about this incident? How do they talk about your husband/family? How does that make you feel?

How have you navigated the legal system? What do your interactions with lawyers and police officers look like? (Ask specifically about frequency, nature of interactions, monetary costs, and other challenges)

2. What does a day at the prison look like?

Follow up prompts:

Can you tell me a memorable story about when you visited the prison last?

How did you get to the prison?

Tell me about the (least) favorite thing you've worn to the prison?

What does it taste, smell, sound, look, or feel like to go see your husband, when he is visiting; after he leaves?

Who accompanied you and why? (Ask specifically about children accompanying)

What was the process of entering the prison?

What are the kinds of interactions you have with prison officials as you visit the prison?

What kind of conversation did you have with your husband? (Ask specifically about feelings, privacy)

What are the other things you observed as you were at the prison visiting room?

How did visiting the prison alter your day? (Challenges, feelings, thoughts)

3. Can you tell me about the time when your husband visited you last?

Follow up prompts:

When did he visit last and for how long?

What did those days look like?

How did you prepare for his prison visit? (ask for emotions that come up along with the pragmatic aspects, get at the aspect of anticipation)

Did you do any special activities together? How would you spend time together?

What did intimacy look like in that time?

How do you contrast that time period with the time you would spend together before he got incarcerated?

How did that visit change the daily routine/rhythm of the household?

How did that change the way decisions are made in the house?

What does it taste, smell, sound, look, or feel like when he is visiting?

What does it taste, smell, sound, look, or feel like after he leaves?

***Financially supporting the family***

**4. What does it mean to support your family?**

Follow up prompts:

Did you have to take up a job after your husband's incarceration?

What was the process of finding work?

What does a regular day in your life look like?

What is the nature of the work that you do and how much do you earn? (Ask specifically about challenges)

What are the household responsibilities that you have to take care of?

What are the kinds of support networks you have to help you take care of these different responsibilities? Who do you go to for advice, monetary support, emotional support?

How have these responsibilities changed the way you look at yourself or the way your life is shaping up?

Do you have any support or help available from any NGOs, or governmental organizations/schemes?

**b). What does it mean on a relational level to be a wife of an incarcerated man?**

**5. Can you begin from the beginning, and tell me the story of your relationship/marriage?**

Follow up prompts:

How did you meet? How did the relationship develop? (Ask for photographs they may have to share)

How has the relationship changed after incarceration?

How does intimacy look like in this marriage?

What have been the best parts of being married to your husband?

What have been the most challenging parts?

What makes you continue being married to each other?

How much of a say do you think you have in this relationship? Who makes key decisions about your life together/how are key decisions made in this relationship?

What is your imagination/vision for your future together?

**c. What does it mean on a deeper (intrapersonal and emotional) level to be a wife of an incarcerated man?**

*Negotiating the identity of being the wife of an incarcerated man*

6. What does the journey of coming to terms with being the wife of an incarcerated man look like?

Follow up prompts:

If you had to introduce yourself, who would you say you are?

How do you see/perceive yourself?

Do you think of yourself as the wife of an incarcerated man?

What does it mean to be the wife of an incarcerated man?

Have you made peace with this identity? Can you walk me through the journey of coming to terms with this identity? (Ask about turning points, challenges, milestones)

How has the way you see yourself changed since your husband's incarceration?

What has been a source of joy/strength/hope for you in your journey as the wife of an incarcerated man?

What can others in a similar situation learn from your experiences?

What would you want the world to know about your story/journey?

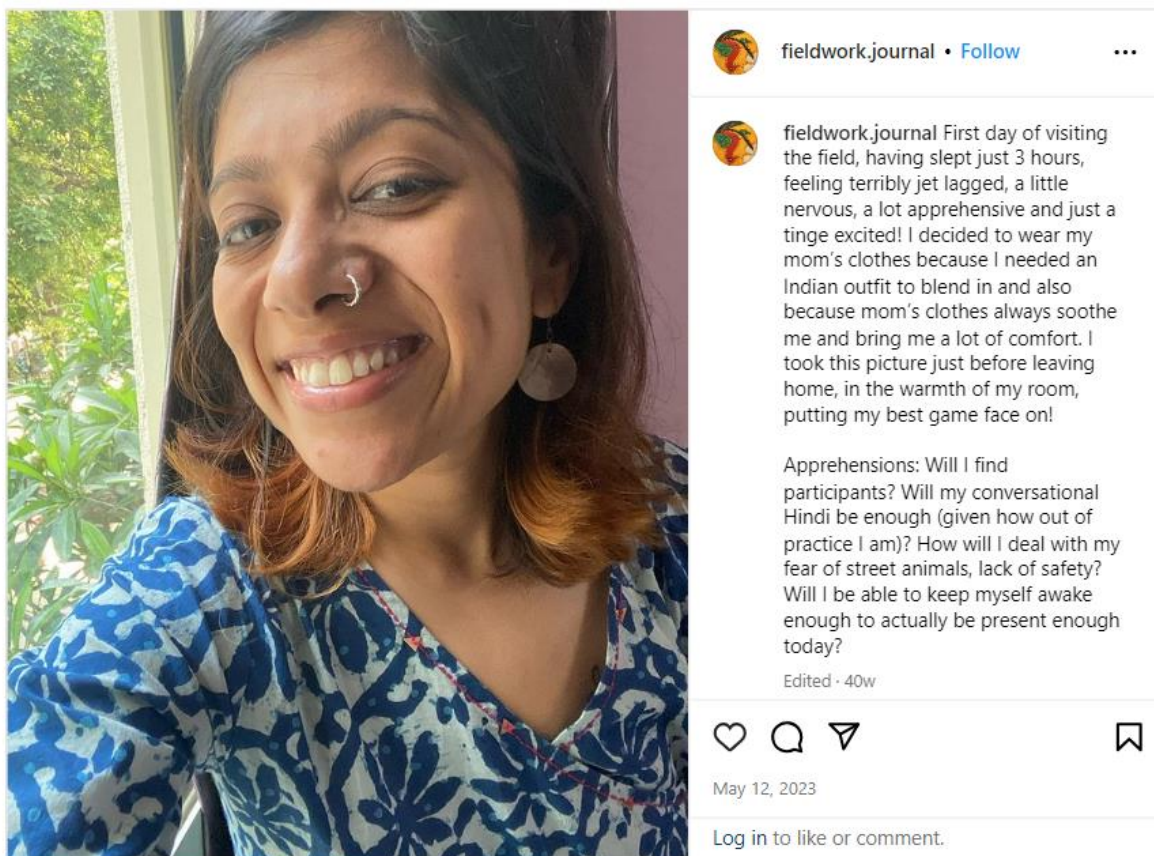
**Socio-demographic information**

7. Religious Identity
8. Caste Identity
9. Education obtained
10. Household structure
11. Household income
12. Debts, asset ownership

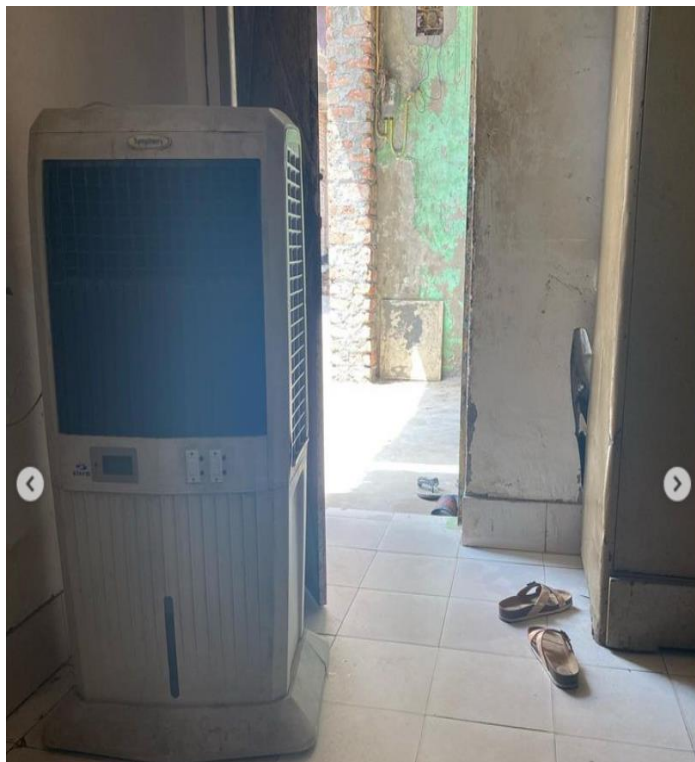
## Appendix B: Instagram Blog

During the course of data collection, I maintained a Private Instagram blog, to document my reflections on the go. This account was shared only with my chair, Dr. Caroline Sanner. This account was a photo diary, where I created 10 posts at different junctures of fieldwork. Some posts had photographs while a couple of posts also included videos. Presented below are 5 posts from this blog. Care was taken to ensure that participants' identifying information (e.g. names, addresses, their photos, or those of other members in the setting), was not used in any of these posts. Pseudonyms were used if I wanted to refer to a specific participant in a particular post. This Instagram account served as a video journal for creating a shared understanding of my fieldwork experiences with my chair.

### Post 1: The first day of data collection



**Post 4: A post about a community-based organization's office which was the location of a few interviews**



fieldwork journal



fieldwork journal The first picture is that of the entrance into a peripheral community. The second and third pictures are from the office of a community based organisation, where I conducted my first interview with a participant. Since the participants were more comfortable coming to the office and also as the same was suggested by the community based organisation, I decided to conduct my interviews from this small office, which has a table, two chairs, two almirahs, and a small couch. There is a ceiling fan and a cooler which keeps the room cool in the absence of airconditioning in this heat. I anticipate that I will spend a lot of time in the coming days in this small little office.

Edited · 2h

Note: Only the second photo from this post is shared here.

## Post 6: Documenting an instance of picking up a woman after a prison visit for an interview



fieldwork.journal

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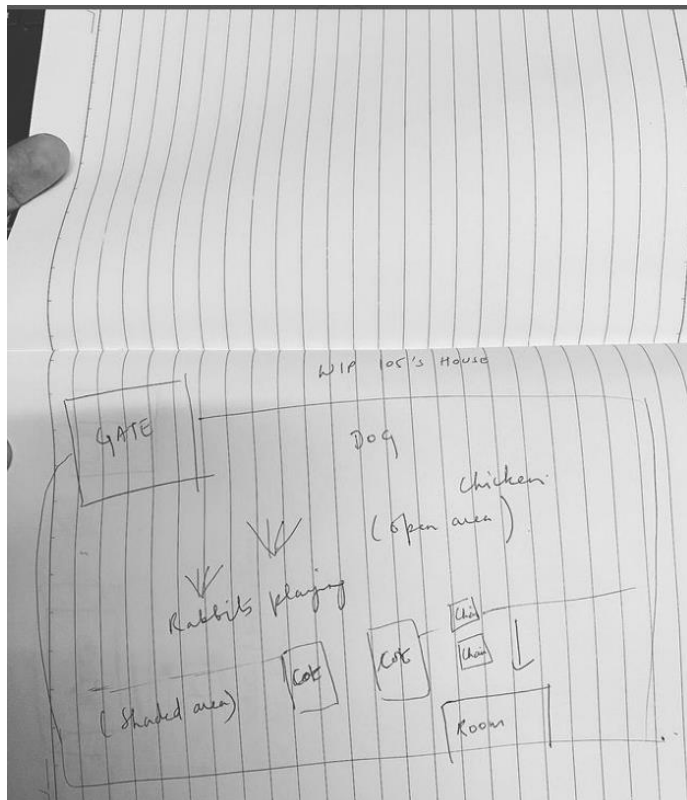
fieldwork.journal Today I went to a Prison Complex to pick up a woman after her prison visit and talk to her as I dropped her home, which would otherwise have taken her 3 hours and multiple changes of transportation. The first video shows the prison complex, which is huge. I have seen it before but not this closely.

The second photo was taken in front of Gate No.2 of the Prison Complex. That is the gate from which visitors go inside to meet their incarcerated family member. This is the gate from which I picked up the woman who had come to visit her husband along with her two daughters. As I arrived, they were sitting on the footpath next to the juice vendor. It took me a little over an hour to drop her home in the car and the road was a very congested one, all the while her older daughter was feeling very motion sick, I can only imagine how much worse this journey would be for her using public transit systems.

Edited · 2h

Note: This post also included a video which is not shared here.

## Post 9: A hand-drawn map of a participant's home



fieldwork.journal

...



fieldwork.journal This is a rough drawing of Ria's house which was located in one of the narrow lanes in a peripheral community in Delhi, which it took us about 20 minutes to walk to from the community based organisation's office. The house had a huge open area where there were a lot of animals including chickens, rabbits and a dog. There was a room next to where the dog was sleeping which I forgot to draw here. Next to the open area was an area which had a roof where 2 cots were laid out and the mother in law was sitting on one of the cots. And some chairs were also laid out. Right after that was the room to which I was taken where I sat with the woman and the other married wives of the house. They all sat on small stools below me as I sat on the couch and when I asked them to sit with me on the couch they said that they are not allowed to do that since the elder men of the family are also in the house (they were sitting outside on the cots and chairs). So the oldest daughter in law sat on the couch with me while the two younger daughters in law sat on a stool and floor respectively. There was a bed on the other side of the room and a tv in front of the bed. A child was lying down on the bed and another young girl kept coming into the room and playing with tree branches as I conducted the interview.

Edited · 2h



Be the first to like this

May 31, 2023

## Post 10: Documenting details of a neighborhood I visited for a few interviews



fieldwork.journal



fieldwork.journal Today I went to a waste pickers' colony to interview women, the entire road had big bags of waste lined on both sides as that's the work that everyone in this locality does. All the women I interviewed are also involved in waste work, it was quite a lot as I ended up interviewing 4 women one after the other as 4 of them had come to speak to me at the house of the community based organization's leader. I knew if I ended up not speaking to even one of them, they wouldn't come to meet me again as they had taken time out to just come and speak with me. So the day was a haze but I am very thankful that I was able to speak to and hear from these women, who were just so authentic and inspiring.

Edited · 2h

## **Appendix C: First Reading of Iqra's Transcript**

### **Initial impressions**

She is a very honest and articulate person who candidly and loudly talks about everything despite her children's presence in the home. She is comfortable and close to her children. She sounds disillusioned with the world and yet she laughs when talking about hardships including debts, receiving verbal abuse and threats from her husband, etc. It seems like she carefully keeps a lid on her anger because she cannot afford to get angry. She cries when talking about her loneliness and the lack of any intimacy or support in her marriage. She sounds very disillusioned particularly with her marriage, and even calls her husband as her "so-called husband" once. She cries when talking about not being given respect by anyone, about not being taken seriously by anyone. She sounds like someone who has a lot of regrets. She seems to be really enjoying talking to the interviewer because of the lack of opportunities to tell her story. Her detailed articulations reflect the desire to share and the existence of a good rapport with the interviewer.

### **Overall gestalt**

*From one terrible low to another/A story of compounded misery, distress and exhaustion/of never catching a break:* Reading her transcript and listening to her audio file, I kept feeling that it's just too much, how can one person endure SO much? There are just too many forms of hardship (including her material hardship growing up, a bad marriage, then getting burnt, then husband's incarceration, mistreatment and lack of support by in-laws, compounded material hardships and health related challenges) one after the other. While she is very resilient and has endured a lot, the resounding theme of the story is that of misery and distress which have managed to just kill her joy.

### **Thematic Content (For more details of each theme, visit digital archive)**

1. Material Hardship, home-based work
2. Enduring third degree burns
3. A loveless intimate partner relationship as a source of multiple grievances
4. Internalization of patriarchal beliefs, making marriage work at all costs
5. Salience of identity as a mother: Children as the only reason to survive
6. Antagonistic in-laws
7. Being aware of one's lower SES
8. Negative experiences with police and prison staff

9. Stigmatization of incarceration
10. Emotional distress and exhaustion
11. Resourcefulness, resilience, and courage
12. Support systems: Natal family, nonprofit, brother-in-law
13. Religion as a non-factor
14. Developing friendships during visitation

### **Reflexivity**

She was just 16 when she was married but I was horrified to realize that she still may be older when she got married than a lot of women I interviewed. I was disturbed to hear the story of her getting burnt and being abandoned by her husband. I couldn't imagine how alone and scared she must have been. I was upset that he got away with that, and she came back for him. It just felt very unfair to me, and I was angry that he did not face severe consequences.

It was infuriating to hear that doctors were not operating on her fibroids due to her age. I have heard friends who are from middle- and upper-class backgrounds struggle to make their doctors take their fibroids seriously and operate upon them. So, knowing that for this participant given her class status, negotiating with the doctor, or standing up to the doctor may be even more difficult made me feel quite upset at the way our society operates and refuses to take women for their word, particularly as far as the health systems are concerned. I felt bad to hear that she would give Rs. 3 to her older kids and Rs. 2 to her younger kids. When I think back to the pocket money I received, I cannot even compare to this in any way, and I have foolishly always thought that I barely received any pocket money when I was in school. This just again makes the class divide so apparent to me. The stigma of being burnt and the way that changes the way people look at us was so powerful in her narrative. It made me think about any of the times when I have seen anyone with any visible marks of being burnt, and those instances have been very rare, but I know that I have looked away. I kept wondering if I would have known someone like her then would I be able to be friends with her and I am ashamed to say that I am not sure if I would be able to, just because of how much I've always cared about appearances and because of the overwhelming feelings of pity that would cloud my behavior. So, I truly felt like the other, while talking to her. Her narrative powerfully cemented me as a complete outsider who couldn't understand, and definitely couldn't imagine being in her shoes.

### Appendix D: Second Reading of Iqra's Transcript

#### Voices

	Voice	Message/Theme	Ideologies
<i>Family Members</i>			
1	<b>Husband</b>	1. Source of contamination through messages: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I don't care about the house, you, or your kids</li> <li>- It is your duty to take care of my family/look after my family (normative gender roles)</li> <li>- Stay at home and do all the household work (normative gender roles)</li> <li>- Now that you don't look good anymore, I don't care about you</li> <li>- You're not worth listening to or respecting</li> </ul>	Patriarchy (normative gender roles, importance of being married for a woman, making marriage work, putting kids first)
2	<b>Parents and siblings</b>	1. Source of contamination through the messages: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Make marriage work/marriage is most important (patriarchy)</li> <li>- Men work and provide for the family while women stay indoors (normative gender roles)</li> </ul> 2. Source of support: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- We are here to support you/care for you</li> <li>- Take care of your health</li> <li>- It's okay to leave your husband</li> <li>- You are so brave</li> </ul>	Ideology of individual responsibility
3	<b>In-laws (Brothers in law, sisters in law, mother-in-law)</b>	1. Source of contamination through messages: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Behave like a married woman and do all the household chores (patriarchal)</li> <li>- You are a burden and are on your own (patriarchal)</li> <li>- You don't deserve respect/we will treat you however we want (patriarchal)</li> <li>- We don't care about you now that your appearance has been tarnished (stigma)</li> </ul> 2. Source of support through the message I am here and will look after you.	Stigma by association and for burns
4	<b>Extended Family</b>	1. Source of contamination through messages: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Your marriage is more important than your</li> </ul>	Internalized classism

	<b>(grandfather, cousins, and other relatives)</b>	education (patriarchal) - You are different from us/we are better than you (stigma/classism)	
<b>5</b>	<b>Children</b>	1. Source of contamination/pressure through the message: - You should fulfill our demands 2. Source of support through message: - We are here for you - We will earn and take care of the family	
<b>Other Voices</b>			
<b>6</b>	<b>Neighbors</b>	1. Source of contamination through messages: - Your husband is a criminal so you're not worth respecting - We don't care about your plight; we won't help you 2. Source of support through messages: - We will help you - We can all live together despite our religious differences	
<b>7</b>	<b>Employer</b>	Source of contamination through the message that we don't care about your circumstances, we only care about our work	
<b>8</b>	<b>Prison Staff</b>	Source of contamination through the message that we don't care about your circumstances, we will follow our rules (insensitivity)	
<b>9</b>	<b>Police</b>	Source of contamination through messages: - We will exploit you, we don't care about your suffering - Domestic violence is a household matter	
<b>10</b>	<b>NGO</b>	Source of support	
<b>11</b>	<b>Other wives of incarcerated men</b>	Source of contamination but reality through the message that when women go outside, their children become miscreants (patriarchy).	
<b>12</b>	<b>Doctor</b>	Source of contamination through the message that	

		I don't care about your suffering, I am the expert, and I will decide.	
13	Landlord	Source of contamination through the message that we don't care about your circumstances, we will exploit you because you are dependent on us.	
14	Teacher + Government	Source of contamination through the messages: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Only father's documents are important, mothers, documents aren't relevant (patriarchy)</li> <li>- Your time is not valuable, your needs are not important because you are poor (classism)</li> </ul>	
15	Society/ World	1. Source of contamination through messages: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Be subservient to those in power (transmitted through natal family and everyone else)</li> <li>- Marriage, family, and kids are everything</li> <li>- As long as your husband provides for you and takes care of you, your marriage is perfect</li> <li>- A husband accompanies a wife to doctor visits</li> <li>- A father takes kids for excursions and takes care of everything to do with the outside world</li> <li>- An uneducated woman cannot do anything (internalized classism)</li> <li>- You're not worth our respect</li> </ul>	

### Reflexivity

*Degree of otherness or relatability:* It was difficult to imagine myself in this participant's shoes. The biggest point of difference was her injury and experience of living with burns. That was not relatable as I cannot imagine going through suffering like that. Apart from the obvious differences including her SES and her husband's incarceration, her education status and that she couldn't study at all was a big point of divergence. The fact that she was financially self-sufficient and was working was a point of convergence. Her loss of her father was another point of divergence as I cannot imagine losing my parents. The fact that she got married very young and had four children was a big point of divergence. Her upbringing in the village was a point of divergence. Her closeness with her mother and immediate family was a point of convergence.

The fact that she didn't have any friends (due to her burns) was not relatable at all. The fact that she had chosen to continue a marriage with someone who had completely abandoned her and took no care of her and that she had just had to be subservient to authority was another point of divergence because due to my privilege I've not had to do that. Yet, I do also understand subservience as that is very much a part of the cultural context in which I was raised too, and I do also respect authority. Her internalization of normative gender roles was a big point of divergence. As I tried to relate to her, I felt very frustrated by her experience with governmental institutions and the complete apathy to her plight in her neighborhood.

### Appendix E: Third reading of Iqra's transcript

*Story/detailed gestalt:* Iqra was born in the village and lived with her mother and her siblings. Her father was murdered when she was growing up. She studied till class 5, due to the lack of focus on education in the village, her father's death, and her family poor financial condition. She worked to help her family financially, she would do embroidery on suits. During her childhood, Iqra had dreamt of living a good life after her marriage, dressing well, and being made to feel special by her husband. She was married off to her husband, by her grandfather, when she was merely 16 years old and moved to Delhi. She had previously only been to Delhi while visiting her uncles. At the time of her marriage, the Iqra's husband had experienced legal trouble due to killing someone who was responsible for his brother's homicide, and he was out on bail. She did not know her husband prior to her marriage. Before her marriage Iqra was misinformed and told that his case had been terminated.

After her marriage, Iqra lived with her husband's family. The household included two of her younger brothers-in-law, an older brother-in-law, a sister-in-law, and her mother-in-law. Her husband worked as a dealer and then later opened a factory. Iqra's mother-in-law was quite strict, and Iqra used to stay at home, do household chores. At the same time, after her marriage Iqra continued to do embroidery work to financially support her family. Her relationship with her husband was not anything special and he never took her out anywhere. She just knew that she did not have a choice but to make her marriage work, but she did not have any love in her relationship. She saw marriage as simply a relationship of responsibility rather than intimacy.

Iqra had had three children and was living with her husband in Jaipur when she was in a terrible accident. The gas cylinder exploded and her entire body, below the neck was burnt. After this accident, Iqra's husband abandoned her. She was taken care of by her family who ensured that she received the medical treatment she needed. She was hospitalized for a fortnight and underwent a 5-hour operation and multiple rounds of blood transfusion. Her husband or in-laws did not even come to the hospital. Thereafter, she lived with her mother and siblings in the village for a year. She would call her husband even though her family told her to leave her husband. Once Iqra recovered, she went back to live with her husband because she badly wanted to make her marriage work. Having this accident caused her to lose her friends as people started looking at her differently and stopped talking to her.

When Iqra returned to live with her husband again, she had her fourth child. At that point her husband used to do embroidery work and provide for the family. Soon after, her husband received conviction and was sentenced for his crime. At the time of his incarceration, Iqra was put on a bus by her husband and told to take care of herself. She ended up going back to her natal family and living with her mother for 7 years. She came back to Delhi when a relative of her husband's insisted that she come back so that her children could be enrolled in school in Delhi with the help of a nonprofit organization. Upon returning, she went back to her in-laws along with her children. Her in-laws did not welcome her into their home but got violent with her and the police had to be called. The police asked her for a bribe in order to not imprison her. Her brothers came to her rescue and spoke to the police to explain the injustice that she had endured.

Eventually, the participant found a house to rent to live with her children. Her brother-in-law got her children enrolled in school. Her financial situation forced her to start working. She ended up getting into home-based work so as to be present for her children and ensure that they were looked after. Iqra did embroidery work, earning approximately Rs. 50 per piece. At the same time, her brother-in-law helped her by accompanying her to prison visits, hospital visits and getting her Aadhar card made. During this time, Iqra visited a judicial court for the first time and was overwhelmed by seeing people dressed in black everywhere. She also went for prison visits to maintain contact with her husband. From being someone who did not know anything, due to being raised in the village and having never stepped foot outside, this period led her to be comfortable in navigating the outside world.

In 2018, the participant's husband was released from prison, and he returned home. However, he was unable to help the family financially due to his worsened physical health due to imprisonment. Currently, Iqra has stopped working due to health problems including fatigue and fibroids. She still gets calls from her previous employer offering her work as she was always a good, subservient worker. Her older daughter is considering looking for a job after completing class 12th to help her family out. Iqra wants her children to become financially independent and have a better future than her. At the same time, she is also frustrated with being exploited and mistreated by her landlord. She is tired of having to vacate a rented house in every 6-12 months and find a new house to stay. So, she dreams to own a house of her own. Iqra's brothers keep scolding her for doing all the outside work and providing for her household, which are things that men are supposed to do. They have also asked her to leave her house and come stay with

them, but she is adamant that she is going to die living by herself with her family. Her mother and brother keep calling her to visit them, but she does not feel like going anywhere. Iqra does not go to any weddings or other celebratory events because she feels bad about going there feeling financially inferior to her relatives. This often makes her children complain as they wish that she would take them to these gatherings.

Iqra's relationship with her husband continues to be unsatisfying. She believes that there is no love between them. He doesn't help out in any way and is not a good father to the children. Each day, he leaves in the morning and comes back home at night and is not concerned about the well-being of his wife or children. Even if he is asked to do anything by them, he threatens to leave the house. Even if she is angry or upset with her husband, Iqra cannot express her emotions to him and instead ends up displacing her anger onto her children. She continues to stay in the marriage out of responsibilities and is not planning to leave her marriage in the future too. Iqra's children are a big source of support, and they help her during moments when she feels like giving up. They care for her and tell her to keep persisting. Her concern for her children helps her be courageous. However, Iqra feels that she does not have the courage to endure anymore and that all her desires have died.

***Story structure: From one low to another/A story of compounded misery, distress and exhaustion/of never catching a break:*** In my first reading I had found this to be a story of endless lows and of a lot of misery, exhaustion, and distress due to the number of hardships Iqra has had to endure throughout her life. At the same time, I do also recognize her resilience, but her endless misery has destroyed her desires and joy. I still do stand by this assessment. While the story arc is one of a lot of valleys, I do also think that her resilience deserves a bit of more mention, and if I were to plot two lines in a graph then the line of life events would be one of a lot of valleys but the one of her resilience would consistently be at a high (though perhaps a dip towards the end due to her current disillusionment).

## Appendix F: Fourth Reading of Iqra's Transcript

### 1. *Intersectionality (For detailed characteristics and quotes visit digital archive)*

Experiencing multiple forms of marginalization due to various co-existing marginalizing identities:

- Class
- Gender
- Literacy/education
- Language
- Religion
- Being married at a very young age
- Being an immigrant to the city
- Being burnt
- Being the wife of an incarcerated person

Gender and class: “The ‘laadli’ scheme form for these kids, some things were needed for that form. Their forms were not filled out because his identity card is not there. So, because of that their teacher refused and said that their forms will only be filled if their father’s identity card is there. The teacher said, “All the documents of their mother are there but if their father’s documents are not there then no government work will happen.”

### 2. *Symbolic Interactionism (for detailed characteristics, descriptions and quotes visit digital archive):*

- Socialized into believing that woman’s marriage is priority over everything else, thus, her grandfather married her off early; her education was not the focus for anyone; learning that women are homemakers and caregivers through specific others including in-laws (“I was a village dweller and my father had also died. His murder had taken place...Then my family members got me married quickly because there was no one to take care of us. My brothers were very little.”)
- Being socialized into viewing men as being responsible for being breadwinners, decision makers, responsible for interfacing with the world, the failure of the husband to fulfil these role expectations becomes a big source of frustration for her (“He keeps lying around, he just keeps lying around. That makes me angry. He will wake up, he will eat, then he will sleep. He will keep snoring and sleeping. That’s what makes me angry.”)

- Growing up with an idealized notion of marriage; where marriage was the symbol of a happy, fulfilling life; she only aspired for her marriage; due to gendered socialization; through specific others including immediate family and the overall context (“One has dreams when, like in the beginning I had gotten married, then when one’s husband takes care of everything. Only then one has dreams.”)
- Marriage becomes a symbol for responsibility rather than love; due to her experiences in her own marriage yet there is the ingrained belief that she must make this marriage work (“It wasn’t such a special relationship...It was just a relationship based on responsibility/duty.”)
- Feeling abandoned by the husband; perceiving the husband as someone who doesn’t care and cannot be trusted (“He had left me there and come. For a year I stayed in my natal home. And you know, my underwent a five-hour long surgery. All of this (pointing to her body) ...he had not seen me. My entire family was there, my paternal grandmother, my uncle, everyone was there...Everyone had come but my husband was not there, neither had any of my in-laws come.”). This sense of abandonment is fueled when she observes other men taking care of their wives, this becomes a reminder of what she doesn’t have in her marriage.
- Due to the mismatch between the husband’s words (during contact) and his actions (prior to incarceration); the husband’s words are interpreted as disingenuous and are unable to soothe the participant; as a result, maintenance of contact during incarceration is not able to create any form of intimacy between her and her husband
- The husband socialized into viewing himself as not accountable to his wife or children due to upbringing by his family in an overarching patriarchal society. For the husband the marriage is a way to fulfil his sexual needs; he only expresses intimacy sexually and is not respectful to his wife or care for her needs otherwise (“At night, he shows a bit of love but during the day he just keeps lying down and snoring.”)
- Being committed to the marriage only for the sake of one’s children; as the mother identity is salient and children are primary; she knew that she would not be able to take care of her children alone (“Just that, because of my children, how would I manage on my own, so (I came back) just thinking about that.”). Believing that mothers are solely responsible for children’s upbringing as it is not her husband’s criminal actions but rather her going outside for work that she perceives would be responsible for her children’s possible delinquency, so she chose to stay at home and not go outside to work; likely socialized into this through

interactions with other women who come from prison visits; family and overarching sociocultural context. (“They will of course become maverick/go astray when there is no one to oversee them at home. That’s why I had to stay at home and work while being at home.”)

- Wanting children to be financially independent, maybe even prioritizing their education over their marriage after her own experiences with marriage which could have changed her beliefs about the priority of marriage for female children (“. They should study and then stand on their own feet. They shouldn’t be dependent on anyone. Even after marriage happens, there is no guarantee that one will stay happy after getting married.”). The participant is hinging all her hopes on her daughter; the focus is on making her financially self-sufficient so that she can take care of her in the future; this is thinking which is very typical of the Indian cultural context whereby children are expected to take care of their parents; so, investing in children’s futures is akin to investment in one’s own future
- Social occasions including weddings become a reminder of lower socio-economic status due to multiple reasons: 1. The participant does not have the money to be able to dress herself or her children in good clothes 2. She does not receive invitations to these events because others know that she does not have money to be able to gift well 3. She does not end up going or taking her children because she knows that seeing everyone else will make her feel even more isolated (“They didn’t even invite us. They have even gotten their children married and still not invited us only because they think that my husband is in prison so what will I be able to gift them.”)
- Internalizing disillusionment due to lived experiences; life itself has become a symbol of suffering and pain (“Nothing feels good. I feel like I don’t know why, like I have to live because I am alive. Out of compulsion, I just have to keep working and living.”)
- Learning that talking to others and sharing distress leads to defamation and gossip (“If I tell anyone then as they say, no one understands anyone...They don’t understand the compulsions of anyone, that yeah, someone may pay them after a few days because they don’t have money right now. No one understands this. If tell anyone, they in fact make fun of us.”). This leads her to completely isolate herself and not even share her distress with her natal family members who actually want to be there for her. Internalizing the belief that she is all alone because she is different from everyone else; has happened through her social interactions after her accident, whereby people have started looking at her differently and

through her experiences with the criminal justice system; and through experiences with her husband and in-laws (“Since the time I got burnt, I couldn’t make any friends. I don’t know why, since I’ve gotten burnt everyone thinks that I am different.”)

- Through her interactions with her landlord, who is mistreats her and her kids, the participant has learnt that those who do not have the resources will always be perceived as “less than” (“To have a house of my own. Every other day, the landlord insults us so much, he insults us a lot. We have to pay so much money and even then he behaves in such a way.”)
- Viewing herself and her family as suffering and being misunderstood due to her husband’s incarceration; due to disrespectful interactions with actors of CJS, lack of experience of respect from family members and neighbors and landlords leads to internalization of the belief that one’s story and suffering does not matter
- Constructing identity as independent from her husband. (“My identity is from me.”)
- Her perception of what it means to be of a certain age is that once one is older one cannot have dreams and aspirations, and this leads her to not have any dreams for herself (“I don’t have any dreams for myself. What dreams could I have now?”); this perception could be due to her worsened physical health with age and through the general narrative in the overarching Indian society that once one is past a certain age one cannot do much; she believes that it is not possible to learn things since one did not get educated when one was younger
- Through the participant’s social interactions (with her family members) and her ability to be able to survive extremely challenging circumstances, she has started perceiving herself as a courageous person (“I am very courageous person. I have courage.”)

### Appendix G: Fifth Reading

In this table, I have ranked each participant's lived experiences on a few parameters.

Category	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Support (1: Absence- 3: Presence)	2	1	2	2	3	2	3	2	2	2	2	1	2	2
Hope–Despair (1: Despair- 3: Hope)	2	2	3	2	3	2	3	2	1	3	2	1	3	1
Mat. Hardship (1: Presence- 3: Absence)	1	2	2	1	2	1	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	1
Culpability (1: guilty- 3: Innocence)	2	1	3	3	3	3	3	2	2	2	2	3	2	1
Love for IP (1: No love- 3: A lot of love)	2	1	3	3	3	3	3	2	2	2	2	2	3	1
Stigmatization (1: Presence- 3: Absence)	1	3	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	1
Literacy (1: Illiterate- 3: Literate)	1	1	2	1	3	1	2	2	1	1	2	1	1	2
Worked before marriage (1: No- 2: Yes)	1	1	2	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	2
Stable/consistent work (1: No- 3: Yes)	1	3	3	1	2	1	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2
Substance Use (1: Present- 2: Absent)	1	1	3	2	3	3	2	1	1	1	1	2	2	2
Domestic Violence (1: Present- 3: Absent)	1	1	3	2	3	3	3	1	1	1	1	3	2	2
Marrying very young (1-3) (2 stands for just 18)	1	3	3	2	1	1	2	1	1	3	1	1	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>18</b>

**(For more details visit the digital archive)**

#### **Possible Story Types**

Stories of love: 103,104, 105, 106, 107, 113

Stories of fast life: 108, 109, 110, 111

Stories of violence and substance use: 108, 109, 110, 111, 101, 102

Stories of despair and disillusionment: 106, 109, 112, 114

Stories of material hardship: ALL

Stories of stigmatization: 101, 106, 107, 108, 109, 110, 111, 114 (absence of stigma only 102)

Stories of redemption / Making it work/ Making ends meet despite all odds: 102, 103, 107, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 114