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# **WOMEN, EMPLOYMENT AND STIGMA OF CRIME: NARRATIVES OF FORMER FEMALE CONVICTS FROM WEST BENGAL**

Shreejata Niyogi\*

## **Abstract**

*This research paper aims at gaining an insight into the experiences of formerly convicted female inmates at the workplace. The focus of this paper is to understand how the stigmatized status of the participants as former female convicts have created a barrier to secure employment and have shaped their experiences at the workplace. In-depth interviews were conducted, administering semi-structured interview guides and four major themes have emerged from their narratives. The themes illustrate the fear of the participants of their criminal record being disclosed, feelings of exploitation that they have encountered, experiencing discriminatory behaviour that has led them to manipulate their employers' perception of their image. The findings illustrate that though criminal stigma is fundamental in the process of their labelling and discrimination, the participants have also been stigmatized for their gender, caste and class position.*

**Keywords:** Female inmates, Stigma, Feminist standpoint perspective, Discrimination, Labelling, Employment

## **Introduction**

Research shows the experiences of women offenders after their release significantly differ from those of their male counterparts. While both male and female ex-offenders face challenges in order to re-integrate with mainstream society after their release, the "intensity, multiplicity and specificity" of needs of female offenders differ significantly (Covington, 2002). Though the rights of the former offenders to re-enter mainstream society have constituted the core of criminological discourse (Lam & Harcourt, 2003), there is a dearth of research concerning the humiliating experiences that the former female offenders encounter. A report published by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India (2018) has noted that due to the stigma attached to their social status, family members of female offenders abandon them, leading to financial obstacles and difficulties in the re-adjustment process for the former offenders (Women in Prisons, India, 2018). Consequently, it becomes an imperative need for the released female offenders to find employment. Given the existing poor condition of the female workers in the Indian labour market (Bhandare, 2018; Saraswathy, 2019), the stigma attached to the former female offenders serve as a potential barrier for them to re-enter the labour market and to maintain a conducive environment at the workplace.

It is against this backdrop that the present paper explores the experiences of released female offenders at the workplace that includes the process of securing employment, the reasons for selecting a particular organization for employment, the rationale for disclosing or hiding their case history, the difficulties that the respondents have faced in their professional realm and the different strategies that they have employed to retain their jobs. Drawing on the narratives collected from the field, and reflecting on Erving Goffman's theory on 'Stigma', this paper intends to explore the experiences of formerly

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convicted female inmates at the workplace and how the stigma attached to their social status has hindered their access to employment and maintenance of a conventional work-life, from a feminist standpoint perspective.

## Literature Review

Criminological scholars and prison committee reports have identified that unemployment is one of the major factors for engaging in criminal activities in general and developing a recidivist attitude in particular. Studies across the world show that employment reduces the risk of recidivism, or at least, is an indicator that develops positive behaviour among the offenders which in turn reduces the chances of recidivism (Skardhamar & Telle, 2012; Tripodi *et al*, 2010). A research work conducted by Trapero, Parra, Hernandez and Ramm (2018) indicates that the incorporation of former offenders into the formal employment system would secure their economic position, which would aid them to support their family, resulting in fewer chances of committing further offences for economic reasons and would also ensure a dignified social life for them.

Correctional institutions worldwide have focused on providing vocational training to the inmates to help them re-enter the labour market after their release. The aim behind this is to aid the inmates to be economically independent after their release and to refrain them from engaging in recidivism (Bosworth, 2005; Lawrence *et al*, 2002; Vacca, 2004; Ward, 2009). It has been identified by Indian scholars that in India, one of the main hindrances for formerly convicted inmates to find employment is their lack of skills to join any industry as a member of the workforce (Khan, 1990; Gupta & Yadav, 2015). Acknowledging this issue, Indian correctional homes have started providing vocational training programmes to the inmates<sup>1</sup>.

In recent years, different initiatives have been considered worldwide to include former offenders in the labour market. However, recent studies show that even after acquiring skills through skill-based training programmes, ex-offenders have been discriminated against by the employers on the grounds of their criminal background (Lam and Harcourt, 2003). An extensive study conducted by Holzer, Raphael and Stoll (2003) distinguished between two different types of barriers for the employment of ex-offenders. Holzer, Raphael and Stoll (2003) has differentiated the barriers to access employment under the categories of 'supply-side barriers' and 'demand-side barriers'. They have identified the general characteristics of the former offenders and the stigma attached to their criminal status as 'demand-side barriers' that are generated by the employers. Many studies have indicated that the stigma associated with the status of the former offenders have played an instrumental role in the recruitment process (Pittard, 2012; Westrope, 2018). To provide the former offenders an inclusive platform at the workplace, many countries have passed legislation to prohibit discrimination against the former offenders in the labour market. The state of New York in America has taken a positive step towards the inclusion of the former offenders into the mainstream. Offenders from the State of New York have the provision of acquiring 'certificates of relief' either from the court or from the New York State Department of Correction

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<sup>1</sup> The information has been collected from the official website of National Crime Records Bureau (2015) - <http://ncrb.gov.in/StatPublications/CII/CII2015/FILES/CrimeInIndia2015.pdf>

and Community Supervision (DOCCS). The aim behind issuing such certificates was to promote employment for the released offenders (Garretson, 2016). Another initiative to provide the former offenders an inclusive platform at workplace is the American campaign 'Ban-the-Box' (later adopted by many other Western countries), that advanced the idea of providing an opportunity to the former offenders to present their credentials in front of the employers before checking their criminal records. However, the study conducted by Agan and Starr (2017) has indicated that such initiatives do not ensure complete secrecy from the employer. Later studies depicting scrutiny of the data of the United States correctional system showed that employers have remained reluctant about hiring an individual with a criminal record (Solomon, 2012; Agan & Starr, 2017). On the other hand, an empirical study conducted by Heydon and Naylor (2018) narrated instances where the HR managers intended to appoint former offenders but were restricted by the different legislatures and government policies. Heydon and Naylor (2018) concluded their study by suggesting that providing an inclusive platform to the ex-offenders depend on the employers' general belief and policy measures. However, in most of the cases, such discriminatory practices situate former offenders at higher risk of societal exclusion. In an attempt to make the labour market more inclusive for the former offenders, Naylor, Paterson and Pittard (2008) proposed a theoretical model which suggests that only 'selective information of criminal records', i.e., 'only those convictions relevant to a specific category of employment' should be disclosed. Another policy that can be employed to include the former offenders into employment has been suggested by Holzer, Raphael and Stoll. According to Holzer, Raphael and Stoll, the State might make certain tax redemption for the employers hiring ex-offenders. Furthermore, the State has to improve the incentives to accept 'low-wage' or 'low benefit' jobs for the ex-offenders (Holzer *et al*, 2003).

In India, the reasons for failure to generate employment for former offenders can be attributed to both the low employment rate in the country and the stigma attached to the social status of the ex-offenders. A report presented by The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) indicated that the unemployment rate has increased in India by 9.1% in December 2020 (Kumar, 2021). With such a high unemployment rate, it is even more difficult for former offenders with the stigma attached to their social status to find employment. Moreover, in a developing nation like India, women constitute only a marginal fraction of the labour force. A study report presented by IndiaSpend revealed that as per the data of Economic Survey 2017-18, female workforce participation is the lowest in India among South Asian countries (Bhandare, 2018). The World Bank report suggests that the labour force participation rate among females in India was 26.97% in 2018, which is much less compared to the world average of 48.47% (Saraswathy, 2019). A report published by the Centre for Sustainable Employment of the Azim Premji University also mentioned that 92% of the women are earning less than 10,000 INR per month in India (Deshmane, 2018). The decision of Indian women to participate in the labour market depends on various factors like educational attainment, age of marriage, fertility rate to produce off-spring and other socio-economic factors (Verick, 2014). Against the backdrop of such a discriminatory condition of the labour market, women who have been stigmatized due to their status as formerly convicted offenders face severe challenges and discrimination at the workplace.

It is important to understand that the stigma attached to their social status creates a separate identity for them which is socially discrediting and acts as a barrier to join the labour market (Myrick,

2013). Sociologist Erving Goffman explained 'stigma' as an attribute which is perceived to be socially discrediting and the social agent, that is the individual possessing the attribute, is discriminated on the basis of that very attribute (Goffman, 1963). Later on, in an attempt to conceptualize the notion of 'stigma,' Link and Phelan (2001) have identified that by exercising economic, political and social power, members of a society can 'label, stereotype, distinguish, exclude and discriminate' against another powerless individual. The notion of stigmatization is thus essentially linked with access to power. Phelan, Link and Dovidio (2008) have further noted that 'stigmatizers' have three types of strong motivation to stigmatize an individual or group. These motivations include exploitation and domination, enforcement of social norms, and avoidance of disease. In the case of criminal stigmatization, enforcement of social norms is the strongest motivation for the members of mainstream society. However, added to this motivation, exploitation and domination can also be the other driving factors, especially when an individual's criminal status is combined with their racial status. Studies have depicted that an individual's race plays an important role in the process of stigmatization as it has been identified that even after possessing similar kinds of educational qualification, skills and criminal background, men of colour have less chance of being employed as compared to white men after their release (Pager, 2003; Pager *et al*, 2009). The research works indicate that criminal stigma as well as racial stigma affect the process of employment. In a similar manner, in a patriarchal, caste-based society like India, the gender and caste of the former offenders also plays an important role in the process of employment. Indian feminist criminological scholars have thus used the class, caste and gender intersection in order to address and understand identity issues (Cherukuri, 2008).

Referring to Kleinman *et al* (1995) and Schneider's (1988) work, Link and Phelan have argued that one of the main challenges of theorizing and conceptualizing the notion of stigma is that it has been done from the perspective of the theorists who are 'uninformed by the lived experience of the stigmatized people' (Link & Phelan, 2001). Hence, it is significant to understand the complexity of the narratives of the former female offenders from the perspective of the feminist standpoint theory that attempts to understand the power relations and experiences of the marginalized communities from their perspectives (Harding, 2004). While existing literatures have analysed the marginalized position of the former female offenders using the intersectional approach, the narratives of the subaltern women who have been socially, politically and geographically excluded from the hierarchy of power have remained under-represented. This study, therefore, attempts to understand the experiences of former female convicts at the workplace from their viewpoint.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Approach**

This paper employs the narrative analysis approach, that particularly attempts to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of the former female inmates at their workplace after their release (Ridder, 2017). The aim of this paper is not to provide a generalization but to understand the commonalities of the participants' narratives and identify the underlying themes based on the same. The narrative approach focuses on exploring the life experiences of the participants of the research (Polkinghorne, 1995; Caine *et al*, 2013). The narrative analysis examines the underlying insights and

assumptions that are shaped by the participants' own experiences (Bell, 2002). This approach is particularly well-suited for this research study that attempts to understand the experiences and encounters of the respondents at their respective workplaces.

## **Sample**

This study is comprised of twenty female respondents, who were convicted prisoners and have been released from different correctional homes in West Bengal, in the last ten years. Unlike quantitative research, the sample size in a qualitative research cannot be predetermined. Theoretically, in any qualitative research, the researcher should attain the saturation point with their inquiry to decide the number of samples. While the disagreement over the definition of saturation remains a challenge for qualitative researchers (Marshall *et al*, 2013), several studies conducted by Braun & Clarke (2016), Fugard & Potts (2015), and Guest *et al*, (2006) have recommended that a minimum sample size of twelve participants is required to reach data saturation (Vasileiou *et al*, 2018). For this study, it was difficult to identify and locate the released convicted female offenders. Hence, the researcher had the chance to interview only a selected number of samples, especially with limited resources (both financial and administrative) and time. Consequently, the researcher had to select a few key informants, that is, NGO workers who are working inside the correctional homes and with the released inmates. The key informants helped the researcher to identify the formerly convicted female inmates and introduce the researcher to the participants. These participants further introduced the researcher to their acquaintances. The researcher duly acknowledges the challenges of such a type of snowball sampling technique, as it lacks the characteristics of a representative sample. However, this was the only possible technique to identify and involve the participants from a specified socially marginalized community (Cohen & Arieli, 2011; Handcock & Gile, 2011; Heckathorn, 2011).

## **Social, Criminal and Employment Profile of the Participants**

Among the twenty participants of this study, three are Muslim and seventeen respondents are Hindu. Among the Muslim women, only one belongs to OBC (Other Backward Classes) category, while two others are from the General category. And among the Hindus, three belong to Scheduled Castes category, one of the respondents belongs to OBC category and the rest of the women are from the General category. Two women from this respondent group belong to the Economically Weaker Section (EWS) category which means that the annual household income is below or up to Rupees 3,00,000. And except for these two women, all the other participants belong to lower income group (LIG) which means that their annual household income is between Rupees 300,001 to Rupees 6,00,000<sup>[2]</sup>.

Among these twenty respondents, only two had completed their graduation before their conviction and another one is currently pursuing her graduation from an Indian university. Three respondents of this study started with their secondary education but did not complete it or appear for the

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<sup>2</sup> The definition of EWS and LIG that has been used in this research paper is as per the standard fixed by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation, Government of India.

examination. Rest of the participants have either completed their primary education or are literate <sup>[3]</sup> but have not received any formal education. Here, it is important to mention that those offenders, who have not received any formal education, have learned to read and write during their stay in the correctional institutions, where they have been trained by the staff or NGO workers.

Among the offenders, two have been accused of conspiracy to murder, seven have been accused under the charges of inflicting torture and engaging in domestic violence, four have been accused of theft and robbery. Apart from these crimes, one was convicted for forgery of signature on official documents, one was convicted against the charges of culpable homicide and the other one was involved in a murder case. Three of the respondents were sentenced for drug peddling and one has been accused of illegally managing a brothel and involving in child trafficking and child prostitution.

Following their convictions, all the twenty respondents whom the researcher has interviewed are either employed in some organization or have started their own enterprises. Four out of fifteen respondents are employed in two different NGOs under the designation of welfare officer or as worker. One respondent is working as a private tuition teacher with an agency. Five among the rest are working either as domestic help or cook, four are working in different factories as wage labourers and four women of the respondent group have set up their own tailoring or grocery shop with financial assistance provided by the NGOs. And the remaining two respondents are working in small food joints. All participants of the study were forced to join the workforce as they either have dependent members in their family or have been abandoned by their family members.

## **Methods of Data Collection**

Data was collected over a period of two years in three different phases, by employing the interview and observation method. The interview schedule was used to collect basic information about the respondents. Later, in-depth interviews were conducted, administering a semi-structured interview guide, which was revised during data collection, depending on emerging themes. The issues that were discussed included the process of getting employed, relationship with their colleagues, clients and employers, their choice to disclose or hide their criminal record from their associates, strategies to retain their jobs, experiences at the workplace, and their perception of stigma associated with their identities. Along with interviews, the observation method has helped the researcher to understand different non-verbal expressions of the participants (Kawulich, 2005). It helped the researcher to identify the issues that they were uncomfortable to discuss or the emotional moments while re-telling their narratives.

## **Data Analysis**

The interviews were conducted mostly in Bengali and Hindi and were initially translated and then transcribed. Transcribed data were analysed using the inductive approach, as the researcher has identified specific themes based on the data (Prince, 1982). The themes that have been explained in this paper have emerged from the commonality of experiences of at least fifty percent of participants' narratives

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<sup>3</sup> According to National Literacy Mission (NLM) programme, literacy refers to learn to read, write and count in any one of the Indian languages and to apply them in their daily life. NLM is a programme that was initiated by the Government of India to educate 80 million adults in the country.



(Bensity *et al*, 2020). A few other important themes have also been identified by the researcher which are not common throughout the narratives of the participants but are significant to understand the experience of this marginalized group. In the next section, summarization of the main themes that indicate the types of experiences of formerly convicted female inmates has been illustrated.

### **Research Setting**

The interviews were conducted in different parts of the state of West Bengal. Here, the researcher has selected West Bengal for two reasons. Firstly, the state of West Bengal is one of the pioneers in introducing different experimental therapies and programmes for the rehabilitation of the inmates. Another reason for which the researcher has selected the released offenders from West Bengal is because India is a culturally diverse country where more than 325 languages are spoken. And as this research is qualitative in nature that aims at understanding the experiences of the inmates, who have joined workforce after their release, it was indeed important to understand the language in which they feel easy to communicate. Hence, the researcher's familiarity with the native language spoken in the state, i.e., Bengali, has acted as an advantage to communicate with the participants.

### **Ethical Consideration**

One of the biggest challenges for the researchers using qualitative research methods is to provide a detailed narration of the respondents' life while protecting their privacy (Saunders *et al*, 2015). Considering the sensitivity of the research work in question, the identities of the respondents have not been revealed in the narratives to honour their privacy. Instead, each participant has been assigned a number based on the order of interviews conducted and the direct quotations that will be illustrated in the 'Findings' section will be presented via these assigned numbers (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2, and so on). However, an alternative approach has been adopted to provide an opportunity to the participants to reveal data while maintaining confidentiality about their identity and criminal case. Participants have been provided with a post-interview consent form, where the participants have been given the freedom to express their willingness to allow or restrain the use of particular data (Kaiser, 2009). This approach has provided a better opportunity to the researcher as well as to the respondents to discuss and decide whether and how particular data are to be revealed. An example of a post-interview consent form has been attached in the appendix section.

## **Findings**

The findings of the study focus on four main themes on the experience of the participants at their workplace: Living in constant fear; feeling deprived; experiencing unequal treatment; and putting extra effort for impression management. This section focuses on illustrating these themes with the participants' narratives.

## Living in Constant Fear

The first theme that has emerged from the narratives of the participants is that the participants live in constant fear. For the participants of this research, fear operates on two levels. Firstly, with limited education and skill, the respondents felt worried about securing employment which was a necessity for them. And once they were employed, the participants remained anxious and terrified of not being able to retain their employment owing to their criminal record. The fear of their identity being disclosed and being shamed because of their convicted status shaped their choices about their work life. Four of the respondents who were employed before had never considered to return to their previous workplace due to the fear of being humiliated and labelled. They preferred to remain unemployed even under severe financial constraints till they found a new source of income. Other respondents also consciously selected their workplace that was far away from their current or previous residential area to conceal their identity. Thirteen out of twenty respondents turned to the NGOs that are working inside the correctional institutions for the welfare of the offenders and are also working with the released inmates. These NGOs primarily provide education and vocational training and psychological counselling to the inmates. Two of the NGOs who work inside the correctional homes have been instrumental in either providing these offenders with employment in some other organization, or hiring them as their own employees depending upon the participants' skills and education, or aiding them with a substantial amount of financial assistance to set up a small tailoring shop or a local grocery store. The main reason the respondents of the study have cited for contacting the NGO workers is that they were already aware about the offenders' life and had seen them 'changing' and 'reforming' over time. The participants were of the opinion that other employers who have not been a part of their journey of transformation would humiliate and terminate them with the slightest hint of them being a former inmate. And due to the limited access to the "outer world", that is, their social sphere, they were unaware about the organizations or places to seek help.

The fear of either losing their job or being publicly shamed remained constant throughout their narratives. As all the participants belong to the economically disadvantaged section of the society, loss of job leading to financial burden remained a constant point of anxiety. The participants who have disclosed their past to the employers but not to other associates (those who are employed via NGO, either directly or indirectly), feel that if their past is revealed to their associates that will lead to both unemployment and social ostracization. A similar kind of fear has been identified while interviewing those participants who have completely concealed their conviction records to their employers and/or associates. It was well reflected in the narrative of Participant 3,

*"I work as a private tuition teacher with an agency. Hence, I don't have one employer, rather it is like serving many clients. And I have never disclosed about my conviction period to any of the families who are my clients or with the agency where I am registered, as I feel that my past would make me lose my job. And I am not only scared of losing the job but also about the fact that once my past is revealed to them, they would see me only as a criminal and not as a teacher, who has provided good education to their children. All the students I have taught in these years have performed well academically. But I fear that once my past will be revealed to my clients, then me being*

*a convicted inmate will be my only identity and nothing more. All the effort that I have put in these few years will simply come to an end."*

The fear of financial loss and fear of getting socially excluded and being labelled as a 'criminal' has remained a recurring theme even for the participants who are self-employed and deal with separate clients or customers. They have also feared that if their criminal records are revealed, it would lead to the shutting down of their enterprises as none of the customers would like to engage in any sort of business with them.

## **Feeling Deprived**

The fear of being labelled and excluded has given rise to the second theme of experiencing deprivation. With limited education and skills, the participants of the study did not have many opportunities to access quality employment. Consequently, they were engaged in low-paid jobs. Moreover, due to their stigmatized status, the respondents had limited opportunities to secure employment. As a result, they had taken the jobs that had been offered to them, which were mostly low-paying. Participant 4 narrated,

*"Before being convicted, I used to work as a cook in different apartments in the locality. However, now everyone is aware of my case as other domestic helps in the locality have shared the information with the residents of these apartments. And after knowing about my case they (the residents) do not intend to hire me. And as a result, I had to join the tailoring unit of a NGO, which pays me only 2500 INR per month. If it would have been possible for me to continue with my job as a cook, I would have been earning approximately 5000 INR per month. I am extremely grateful to the NGO didis' (NGO workers, whom they affectionately refer as sisters) for providing me with at least some source of employment. But you tell me (questioning the interviewer) is this amount enough to take care of a family consisting of 6 members? Apart from me, only my son works. Even he does not earn much. Every month we struggle to take care of the basic expenses."*

The issue of facing a financial constraint is common for most of the participants. Three participants have also mentioned that when they have tried to negotiate with their employer to increase their salary, they have mostly received a negative reaction. The employers have reminded them that "they should be thankful enough to at least have a job". Even the participants who have set up their own grocery shop or tailoring unit have experienced such sense of deprivation. Due to the fear of 'being identified' and stigmatized, they have selected the venue to set up their business in a locality that is far away from their area of residence. While on the one hand this has helped them to maintain confidentiality, on the other, it has compromised their profit from the business. They themselves pointed out that they have not been able to find a "suitable venue" that is profitable for their business. Moreover, they travel every day from one end of the city to the other or from their village to the city, spending a considerable amount of money on travelling. Participant 7 who has set up a grocery stall now, mentioned,

*"Every day I travel almost 10 kilometres from my home to the market where I have set up my new stall. Travelling every day to and fro covering that much distance is*

*exhausting. Moreover, in these local markets, the already established vendors are not so cooperative about a new person setting up their business there. Moreover, over a period of time, even the regular customers form a bond with the vendors. And they prefer to purchase things from their acquaintance only. Consequently, it becomes even more difficult for us to set up something new."*

Added to the issue of feeling unprivileged due to their stigmatized social status, five of the participants who are either SC or OBC mentioned that their caste position has also played an important role in the process of deprivation and stigmatization. Participants 6 and 7 remarked that due to their caste position, they did not easily get jobs as cooks in few households. Referring to other participants, they mentioned that those belonging to the general category could find jobs as domestic help or cook, while they "struggled not only for being a former inmate but also because of their caste position". They have narrated from their lived experiences that many upper-class or middle-class families prefer not to employ someone from the lower caste groups.

### **Experiencing Unequal Treatment**

The third theme that has emerged from the narratives is unique to the respondents whose convicted status is known by their employers or any associates in their professional realm. The respondents mentioned that they have sensed that they are 'constantly being watched'. Illustrating the theme of workplace surveillance leading to discriminatory treatment, Participant 1 who was booked under a theft and robbery charge narrated,

*"I couldn't find any work outside and hence joined the NGO office as an office staff. I am grateful to NGO didis for employing me but not all of them are cordial to me. I can sense that some of them do not trust me completely. They never leave me alone in the office room. I can sense them gesturing to each other to not to leave me alone in the office room. They never do that with other office workers. After all, they have never served a sentence like me."*

The participants have revealed that along with constant surveillance, they have also experienced the 'harsh' and 'threatening' behaviour of the employers or associates towards them if any unanticipated incident occurred at the workplace. In their own words, they feel that they are "being treated differently from others". Participant 11 described such instances,

*"As my employer is aware about my conviction, I can sense that I am under constant surveillance. When some small material like thread or piece of cloth (she worked in the garment manufacturing factory) goes missing, invariably I become the first suspect even if someone else has misplaced it. This is followed by an interrogation session and threat to hand me over to the police. And this has happened more than once. However, such incidents have never happened to my colleagues, who had no criminal records. They never had to undergo any discriminatory attitude from the authorities. And due to such experiences, I always live under constant fear that they might turn me over to the police."*

The respondents also added that the unequal treatment that they encountered at the workplace is partly due the fact that they are 'women'. Nineteen out of twenty participants mentioned that they feel they are more prone to labelling and discrimination because of their gender, as "society expects women to be morally correct". They feel that their past as a convicted inmate attests to the fact that they devalue both societal norms and legal rules. In their opinion, them being women has resulted in more discrimination. Voicing her despair and pain, Participant 14 illustrated her case,

*"I belong to a poor, uneducated family. My parents arranged my marriage at a very young age. I was a victim of domestic violence throughout my married life. Then, my husband left me because my family could not pay dowry and I had given birth to two daughters and not sons... He threw me out of his home and was planning to get married again... I could not go back to my maiden home as my father was already under financial burden. I had no other way than to commit suicide with my daughters. It was just my bad luck that I survived, and they are no more... Soon after the incident, everyone was quick to judge me that how bad I was as a mother. It seems that only a mother has the responsibility to take care of children and a father has no responsibility. Nobody, even for once, pointed a finger towards him, but everyone said that I had killed my daughters. Even the police filed a case of culpable homicide on me. If I was in my husband's position, I am sure no one would have made me feel so humiliated. I regret not being able to protect my daughters, but I definitely didn't murder my children like they (neighbours, relatives and friends) say."*

### **Putting Extra Effort for Impression Management**

The fear of getting socially discriminated against and losing their jobs have forced the participants to opt for certain coping strategies to retain their jobs. The respondents themselves fear that if their employers or colleagues become aware of their conviction record, they might be terminated from the jobs. The participants whose employers are aware of their past, feel that their associate might 'pressurize the employers to reconsider their decision about hiring a former inmate'. The participants who are self-employed traders feel that their associates (other vendors in the market or other shopkeepers of the locality) might socially ostracize them. They feel anxious as they believe that if their associates are aware of their 'cases', they (other vendors in the market or other shopkeepers of the locality) might inform the customers as well, leading to both social boycott and financial loss.

Due to such fear, the participants have tried to influence or change the perception of others about them at workplace by acting 'too nice' and 'too sweet'. The respondents have professed that they 'try too hard to keep a good impression' upon others so that even if their employers or associates learn about their past, they (the colleagues and employers) would be a little considerate. Participant 17 who works as a domestic help recalled,

*"I remember once boudi (her employer whom the participant refers to as sister-in-law) told me that they terminated the previous help because she used to steal money and grocery. I was so scared after that. I thought of leaving my job right after that. But I*

*must feed my kids as well... Moreover, over the last few years, we (she and her employer) have developed a little affectionate, personal bond as well. If some good food is prepared at her home, she sends it for my kids or sends medicine when I or my kids are not well. In turn, I also do not ask for extra money in case I have to work overtime or do some extra work. I do not want to risk that bond as well. So, I try to be too honest. If I find money or other valuable objects while cleaning the home or washing the clothes, I quickly return that to them (employer's family members). If something happens tomorrow, they will believe me or at least, might not terminate me immediately".*

This depicts that the participants of the study are trying to avoid being stigmatized by presenting themselves in such a manner that influences the other persons' perception about them, a process that has been termed as 'Impression Management' by sociologist Erving Goffman (1959).

## **Discussion**

The present study that aimed at gaining insight into the experiences of the formerly convicted female inmates in their respective workplaces has been discussed in the light of Erving Goffman's theory of stigma from a feminist standpoint perspective. Drawing from the feminist standpoint perspective, this study illustrates the experiences of marginalized women at the workplace and how the criminal stigma attached to their identities influences the power dynamics that they share with their employers and associates. The experiences of constant fear, deprivation, discriminatory treatment, and struggle for impression management that they have encountered at the workplace have evoked due to the fear of stigmatization leading to social ostracization.

The participants' primary concern has remained the fear of humiliation due to the stigma attached to their status as a former inmate. This fear depicts two different dimensions of the stigmatization process. The respondents have internalized negative stereotypes associated with them to such an extent that they became selective about the types of work, organizations they join and the venue of their workplace (Pattyn *et al*, 2014). It is evident from the narratives of this research paper that due to the fear that they might be labelled and discriminated against, they have remained unemployed rather than re-joining their previous workplace. And many of them have shared their struggle and sought support from the 'the wise' (Goffman, 1963), that is, the NGO workers who were aware of the participants' position and were sympathetic towards them. While their anticipated stigma has resulted in fear and deprivation leading to careful selection of organizations, employers and venue of jobs resulting in financial loss, the perceived stigma that the participants have encountered resulted in feelings of discrimination and unequal treatment at the workplace (Pattyn *et al*, 2014). The narratives have recounted that the respondents have experienced unequal treatment from the employers due to their criminal record. And their conviction record has constituted the core of the construction of their new identity as a female offender. After their release, their stigmatized convicted status has shaped their social interaction process and relations with their associates. The experiences of discrimination and prejudice have had a negative impact on their work-life and as a result, they have tried to influence or change the perception of others about themselves at the workplace by trying to act in certain manner or hiding their past. This is a process of responding

to stigmatization that Goffman has termed as 'Impression Management'. Goffman has explained in his exemplary work 'The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life' (1959) that 'impression management' is a process of self-presentation that involves manipulating and changing the perception of others about an individual by controlling social interaction. And for the participants of this study the 'front stage' is their workplace where they formally perform by not showing emotions like anger, despair, humiliation and discomfort. As the participants have recounted in their narratives, many a times, they have felt anger or sadness or have felt insulted, but they have not expressed these emotions in order to maintain their "good impression" in front of others.

The study also focuses on the ways in which gender, class and caste, along with the criminal stigma have shaped the experience of the participants. The discrimination that the participants have encountered portrays the power dynamics between the 'stigmatized' and the 'normals' or the stigmatizers (Goffman, 1963). Goffman's theory of stigmatization has explained the process by which the 'normals' discredit and discriminate a particular section of the society based on specific characters they possess, by exercising power. However, this research work focuses on understanding the power dynamics leading to the interaction process between the stigmatized and the 'stigmatizer' (Hekman, 1997) illustrating the experiences of the marginalized group that has been stigmatized both on the basis of their character trait (imprisoned) and on the basis of their group identity (gender, class and caste). In a society like India, the social status of the participants has placed them in a complex situation where they are exploited on the grounds of their gender, class and caste. The socially constructed identity of a woman has depicted her to be morally upright, conformist and a motherly figure. When they (the participants) have violated these moral standards of society and committed certain actions that are prohibited by the law, they have also involuntarily challenged the notion of 'ideal women'. Consequently, the response of mainstream society towards them has been more discriminatory than towards their male counterparts. However, it is imperative to note that though one of the main demarcating characteristics between the stigmatized and the stigmatizers is their gender identity, it is important to understand that in many instances, both the stigmatized and the stigmatizer are of the same gender. Many of the employers or associates of the participants who have given unequal treatment to them are women. As the stigmatization process is inevitably linked with exerting power on others, the basis of possessing a powerful position lies in the 'un-stigmatized' status of the stigmatizer women. Moreover, the participants of the study mostly belong to the lower income group with limited education, work experience and resources. Their status in the social hierarchy has already restricted their opportunities to access quality employment. Their participation in the labour market is rather forced to fulfil the basic needs for food, shelter, and clothing. Though the participants from Scheduled Castes or Other Backward Classes constitutes a small number in this study, their narratives have clearly deciphered how their caste has acted as a barrier for them to join the workforce. It is important to understand that for the participants of this study, the discrimination works on four levels. Firstly, they experience discrimination due to their imprisonment; then they have been discredited for being a women offender. And such devaluation and discrimination further continued based on their class position and caste identity. Consequently, what the participants of the study encounter in their everyday life is a result of multiple stigma (Gunn *et al*, 2016).

The narratives illustrate a complicated power dynamic. And to understand the intricacies of such power relations, it was important to introspect the issue from the feminist standpoint perspective that aims at understanding social aspects from the perspective of women or a marginalized group of women. The nuance of such power dynamics based on one's gender, class, caste and conviction status can only be possibly explained from the perspective of the marginalized community. In an attempt to understand and analyse the nuances of such power dynamics, this paper particularly focuses on the issues of the subaltern female offenders as they have been socially, politically and geographically excluded from the hierarchy of power. This paper particularly provides the subaltern perspective to the issue of female offender rehabilitation and their experiences at the workplace after their release.

## **Conclusion**

The rehabilitation of inmates and after-care services available to them has constituted the core of the criminological discourse and the criminal justice system. However, the voices of the released offenders in general and former female inmates in particular, about their experiences in the post-release phase have remained a neglected field of study in the sociological discourse. The purpose of this research work was thus to provide a voice to the formerly convicted female inmates to share their experiences at the workplace. Some experiences of the participants attest to the existing body of literature about the employment experiences of the released inmates in other countries. Some studies have even pointed out that along with criminal stigma, racial discrimination also plays an important part in the employment process for a former inmate. Following a similar line of discourse, it is evident from this study that the role race plays in one's employment process after their release, gender contributes in a similar manner in the Indian context. The uniqueness of this research paper lies in the fact that it views criminal stigma not in isolation, but rather studies the issue in a larger complex context that focuses on the dynamics of criminal stigma and gender. The study also incorporates the voices of lower class-lower caste stigmatized women who are the most vulnerable section in the already marginalized group. However, the study does not intend to generalize the experiences of the participants; rather it just points out the commonalities in their experiences. The limitation of this study lies in the limited number of sample size that fails to incorporate the experiences of upper-class women. Future studies can include the experiences of women belonging to different social and economic strata of the society. This study provides a preliminary introduction to identify the experiences that a female inmate encounters at workplace. Their fear, feeling of deprivation and exclusion, experiencing unequal treatment leading them to set-up strategies for impression management provides an in-depth understanding of their interpretation and approach towards a certain issue. The illustrations from the narratives direct us towards the loopholes in the rehabilitation programmes for the ex-offenders. Though prison committee reports and manuals including the West Bengal Correctional Services Act (1992), All India Committee on Jail Reform report (1983), Women in Prisons report (2018) have focused on the issue of after-care for former offenders, the lack of proper guidelines related to what constitutes after-care, the role of the state and correctional institutions to guide the former offenders to re-integrate and re-adjust to the mainstream, providing shelter homes or ways of employment have created a huge gap between the policies outlined in these reports and practice. Considering the scanty number of researches being conducted on the re-adjustment process of the former



female offenders and the role that the correctional institutions and the State, the present study provides a positive step towards understanding their issues in re-integrating them into the mainstream. A thorough understanding of their experiences will help the future researchers and policy makers to formulate suitable policies for this marginalized section of the society. The present study provides a backdrop for the policy makers to understand the issue of after-care, re-integration with the mainstream and the financial problems and formulate policies accordingly.

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## Appendix

### *Post-interview consent form*

Now, after the completion of the interview, the researcher would seek your feedback on how you prefer to have your data handled. Hence, the researcher would like to request the respondents to let her know about the respondents' feedback and approval by marking against any of the following statements:

- The researcher may share the information as provided by the participant, without changing any details.
- The researcher may share the information as provided by the participants. However, the researcher is requested and advised not to use the participant's real name as others might identify the respondent.
- The researcher may share the information as provided by the participant. However, the researcher is requested not to use details about certain incidents that might make the respondent identifiable to others. In particular, the following pieces of information should not be shared without altering the data to make the respondent unidentifiable. In case, these information are shared after alternation, the researcher should contact the respondent to seek his/her consent before using the altered version. (Please provide the details of the information, which should not be shared):

Respondent's signature / Verbal Consent \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

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