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Impact of the prison environment on children residing with incarcerated mothers with special reference to the female ward at the Welikada Prison, Sri Lanka

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Background: Sri Lankan prisons have separate accommodation for women offenders with the concerns of special care as a vulnerable group. In the Sri Lankan prison system, most prisons have separately functioning female wards depending on the number of women offenders. In some instances, women offenders are imprisoned with their breastfeeding children according to the stipulated provisions of the Prison Ordinance No. 16 of 1877. This research focuses on the impact of the prison environment on children residing with incarcerated mothers in the female ward of Welikada Prison, Sri Lanka. The objective was to explore the physical, mental, emotional, and developmental consequences of such an environment on these children.

Method: A qualitative research approach was applied, focusing on semi-structured interviews with 18 purposely selected incarcerated mothers residing with their children in the Welikada Prison female ward. The gathered data were analyzed using the thematic analysis method to determine the impact of the prison environment on children, mainly focusing on sub-themes such as physical and environmental impact, psychological and emotional impact, and educational and social development.

Results: Findings indicated that these children face significant challenges including a limited environment, lack of nutrition, lack of early childhood education, lack of socialization, and a fixed daily routine.

Conclusion: This study emphasizes the urgent need for new policy interventions to address the issues experienced by children in prison environments to uplift their well-being. It is recommended that child care facilities be improved, early childhood development programs be implemented, and psychological services be provided for both incarcerated mothers and their children.

Keywords: Prison environment, incarcerated mothers, female ward, breastfeeding, policy intervention.