Traumatic Life Experiences and Self-Harm In Women Prisoners of Pakistan

Hina Javed Rana and Nashi Khan
Centre for Clinical Psychology,
University of Punjab, Lahore

Abstract
The current study was aimed to assess the association between traumatic life experiences and self-harm in women prisoners of Pakistan. It was hypothesized that frequent traumatic life experiences increase the risk of self-harm in women prisoners. It was the correlational study and purposive sampling was employed. Study sample was comprised of 38 women prisoners (N= 38) and data was collected from Kot Lakhpat Central Jail, Lahore- Pakistan. A Structured Interview Performa was devised by the researcher for assessing traumatic life experiences and Deliberate Self-Harm Inventory (Raiz & Agha, 2012) was used as assessment measures in order to assess frequencies of self-harm in women prisoners. Data was statistically analyzed by computing Pearson Product Moment Correlation and Regression Analysis. Findings revealed that less family support during imprisonment was significantly positively associated with self-harm. Furthermore, a Regression Analysis showed that traumatic life experiences were strong predictors for self-harm in women prisoners. The results of this current study imply that women prisoners who have more traumatic life experiences are more vulnerable to indulge in self-harming behaviors. The findings also highlight the importance of forensic psychologists and psychological intervention according to the needs of women prisoners in prison setting of Pakistan.

Keywords: Traumatic life experiences, self-harm, women prisoners, prison setting, Pakistan.

INTRODUCTION
In the past few years many researches have been carried out on self-harm among prisoners (Appelbaum et al., 2011; Blanchette, 1997a; Blanchette, 1997b; Fulwiler, Forbes, Santangelo, & Folstein, 1997). Due to increased incidents of self-harm among prisoners, researchers conduct investigations for assessing the relationship between traumatic life experiences and self-harming behaviors among prisoners (Ireland, 2001; Messina, & Grella, 2006).

In order to understand the concept of trauma, one can take it as a negative experience in life as well as response to violence. Trauma is used for both an event and specific response towards an event. This term is used for both an event and specific response towards an event. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) defined the term trauma in which a person has a direct interaction with an event that includes serious injury, unexpected death/threatened death, threat for someone physical integrity, and any type of harm or violence experienced by any closed one (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). An individual shows some kind of fear, helplessness, and horror in response to such events.

Trauma starts from an event that burdens the coping mechanism of a woman. Consequently different painful emotions and destructive behaviors originate (McHugh & Snow, 2002). The term trauma, abuse, and post-traumatic disorder are used interchangeably (Covington, 2003).

Researches indicate that women offenders have different traumatic experiences during their life span. Mostly they experienced physical, sexual, and emotional abuse in their childhood and adolescence. Findings revealed that histories of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse were more among women prisoners then men prisoners (Morash, Bynam, & Koons, 1998; Mullen, 1993). Victimization serves as a predictive factor for the initiation of crime by women (Chesney-Lind, 1989). Women who committed violent crime in their young adulthood had the history of physical abuse in their childhood (Haapasalo & Moilanen, 2004). In Pakistani culture domestic violence, poverty, and difficulty in approaching education mark serve as maintaining factors for high illiteracy rate among women (Country gender profile, 2008). These factors also included in traumatic experiences which cause stress and effect mental health of women. Women, who are in prison, have more trauma
exposure of which 98 % is related with interpersonal problems and 71 % linked with domestic violence (Green, Miranda, Daroowalla, & Siddique, 2005). Women prisoners experienced different types of abuse during their whole life span. Mostly they had sexual or physical assault, domestic violence, and psychological abuse (Morash, Bynam, & Koons, 1998). In criminal justice the concept of trauma-informed is very important. Women who experienced more maltreatment in their childhood, physical abuse and sexual abuse during adolescence/adulthood must have lack of knowledge about the phenomena of trauma. The information about the concept of trauma is very crucial point in women rehabilitation (Covington, 2003).

During mid 1990s, the concept of self-harm was highlighted for public awareness although this concept was not new (Adler & Adler, 2005). Self-harm is defined as an act which causes psychological or physical harm to oneself without the conscious intentions of dying. Self-injury is the subcategory of self-harm. Self-injury is explained as the act of an individual intentionally harming self in a way that leads to visible bodily injury (Blanchette, 1997a; Blanchette, 1997b). Self-injury includes skin cutting, burning, scalding, insertion of objects in the body, and in some extreme cases breast and genitalia self-injury (Middleton & Butler, 1998). More often in literature both terms, the attempted suicide and self-harm were used interchangeably (Shaw, 2002).

Most of the people use more than one method of self-injury (Shaw, 2002). Cooper et al. (2008) identified that self-harm serves as strong predictors of suicide. The major difference between self-harm and suicide is the intention and motivation behind the act which should be taken with care for making discrimination between these two phenomena.

Investigations indicates that prisoners who did self-harm during imprisonment had traumatic experiences during their childhood i.e., parental discord, being away from mother, physical, and sexual abuse (Leibling, 1992; Linehan, 1993).

The Howard League for Penal Reform (2008) stated that the incidence of self-harm increased by 37 % in United Kingdom prisons during the years from 2003 to 2007. In prison population, self-harm is a significant issue which is taken with great concern due to increase in its occurrence (McHugh & Snow, 2002). Different statistics showed that in last few years, the incidence of self-harm among prisoners increased markedly. Small number of investigations was done for evaluating the predictive factors of self-harm in prison setting (Howard League for Penal Reform, 2008; Leibling, 1992; Shaw, 2002).

Literature review indicated that in Pakistan no such research work has been done which identify traumatic life experiences among women prisoners that serve the basis of self-harming behavior in them. The current study aimed to assess the traumatic life experiences of women prisoners in Pakistan. It was also aimed to assess association between frequent traumatic life experiences and self-harm in women prisoners. In the current study following hypothesis was formulated;

- Frequent traumatic life experiences increase the risk of self-harm in women prisoners.

This study will facilitate to understand about traumatic experiences which Pakistani women prisoners are facing and making them vulnerable towards self-harming behaviors. This study aimed to highlight the importance of forensic psychologist and psychological intervention according to the needs of prisoners in prison setting. In this way current study will help us for making efforts in reducing the incidence of self-harm by managing trauma in an effective manner among women prisoners.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

Purposive sampling technique was used in this study. Data was collected from Kot Lakhpat Central Jail, Lahore, Pakistan. Sample size was calculated with the help of G-Power. The inclusion criteria for research participants was as follows; (1) women prisoners who have committed self-harm during their imprisonment (2) falling in the age range of 18 to 70 years (3) both under-trial and convicted women prisoners were included. The participants who had any kind of neurological deficits, psychiatric illness in the past as well as suicidal ideation without the history of self-harm were excluded from the study. Assessment was done on 115 women prisoners. Only 38 women prisoners fulfilled the inclusion criteria of the research and become study sample (N=38).
Measures

Structured Interview. A performa of structured interview was devised by the researcher to assess traumatic life experiences which could lead women prisoners towards self-harming behaviors. From literature review, relevant information about traumatic life experiences was extracted for constructing the structured interview. The interview covered several traumatic life experiences and other related information. It included areas like demographic information, economic stressors, strained relationships with family members during childhood, history of physical and sexual abuse, strained relationship with husband, drug addiction history, history of psychological illness in family, history of imprisonment, and other possible variables that served the basis of self-harming behaviors among women prisoners. Each question provided set of specific options. For example, (1) Do you have to pay a debt? Yes/No (2) Have you ever earned money through an illegal ways? Yes/No (3) what ways your husband used to abuse you physically? (a) beating with hands (b) beating with any hard thing (c) try to burn you (d) try to throw acid on you. All questions were reviewed by three experts before conducting an interview. The composite score of traumatic life experiences was calculated by adding up there frequencies. Greater scores on traumatic life experiences indicted presence of more traumatic experiences in women prisoners’ lives.

Deliberate Self-Harm Inventor (DSHI). Deliberate Self-Harm Inventory (Gartz, 2001) was used to assess frequency of self-harming behaviors in women prisoners. In the current study Urdu translated and adapted version of this scale was used (Raiz, & Agha, 2012). Formal permission was taken from authors. Deliberate Self-Harm Inventory (DSHI) is a self-report questionnaire which consists of 17 items. It assesses frequency, severity, and duration of different types of self-harm. DSHI has high internal consistency (α = .82) and also has adequate test-retest reliability (φ = .68, p = < .001) which indicates that it is highly reliable tool for assessing self-harming behavior. In this study frequencies of different self-harming behaviors were considered by using Deliberate Self-Harm Inventory. All frequencies of different types of self-harm were summed up for making one composite score of self-harm. These summed up scores were used in statistical analysis.

Procedure

The data was collected from women section of the Kot Lakhpat Central Jail, Lahore – Pakistan after taking formal permission from Deputy Inspector General, Lahore for conducting research. The pilot study was conducted for testing the logistics of the study and assessment tools to be used in this research. Research ethics were considered throughout the research procedure by clearly informing about the nature and the purpose of research to the participants. Confidentiality was ensured but due to some restrictions from the administration only verbal informed consent was taken from the research participants. Structured Interviews and Deliberate Self-Harm Inventory were conducted in both Punjabi and Urdu language according to the participant convenience. All interviews were completed in two months from March 2013 to May 2013.

RESULTS

The results indicated that 47% of women prisoners had strict home environment. About 50 % women had unsatisfactory relationship with their husbands. Almost 61 % of women prisoners experienced physical abuse by their husbands. The history of drug usage before imprisonment was found in 42 % of women. It was also noted that 66% women prisoners miss their children during their imprisonment. This shows that separation from children plays an important role in effecting their mental health.

Correlational analyses were conducted to examine the association between traumatic life experiences and self-harm among women prisoners. Table 1 shows that traumatic life experiences and self-harm had significant positive correlation, r = .34, p = .019. It reflects that frequent traumatic life experiences increase the risk of self-harm among women prisoners. Among all traumatic life experiences, low family support system was significantly positively correlated with self-harm, r = .33, p = .05. Furthermore, a linear regression analysis was conducted in which frequency of traumatic life experiences of women prisoners was taken as predictor and self-harm as an outcome. The results revealed that frequent traumatic life experiences serves as a significant predictor of self-harm among
women prisoners \( F (1, 36) = 4.81, \text{ Adjusted } R^2 = .09, p = .03 \). This implies that more traumatic experiences in life make women prisoners vulnerable towards self-harming behavior.

**Table 1**

**Linear Regression Analysis with Frequent Traumatic Life Experiences as Predictor and Self-Harm as an Outcome (N=38)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Constant</th>
<th>r</th>
<th>( R^2 )</th>
<th>( \Delta R^2 )</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>( \beta )</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequent Traumatic Life Experiences</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. \( \Delta R^2 = \) Adjusted \( R^2 \) (explained variance); B = Unstandardized Coefficient; \( \beta = \) Standardized Coefficient; * p < 0.05

**DISCUSSION**

In Pakistan prison environment and mental health in relation to prisoners have been neglected from long times. Limited research work has been conducted in Pakistan on women prisoners and their related problems in different contexts (Zadeh & Ahmad, 2012). In Pakistan like India and other developed countries women prisoners were neglected from decades but from last few years their problems were studied for making reforms in prison settings. It is very important that in prison setting medical and psychological help would be available for the prisoners in order to meet their emotional, psychological, and physical needs. Now a day’s European countries are trying to implement alternative techniques for the rehabilitation of their prisoners whereas in Pakistan rehabilitation of their prisoners were low priority agenda (Zadeh, & Ahmad, 2012). The current study was different in its nature that in Pakistan previously traumatic life experiences and self-harm in women prisoners had not been studied together. This study was conducted to explore traumatic life experiences among Pakistani women prisoners by using Structured Interview and Deliberate Self-Harm Inventory. The aim of this study was to investigate relationship between traumatic life experiences and self-harm among women prisoners. This study aimed to highlight the importance of forensic psychologist and psychological intervention for women prisoners.

The results of the present study suggested that some traumatic life experiences are the basis of self-harming behaviors in women prisoners. Current study results indicated strict home environment play an important role for the act of self-harm in women prisoners. This current finding is consistent with previous literature which suggested that the early unstable environment of an individual teaches poor coping strategies in response to the emotional distress and as a result person indulges in different destructive behaviors i.e., self-harm (Linehan,1993). Self-harm is more prevalent in women prisoners than men during imprisonment due to more unstable relationships and experiences of abuse (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 1997).

The present study results also suggest that unsatisfactory relationships with husbands and physical abuse by husbands are traumatic life experiences of women prisoners. Previous research findings also provided the similar evidences that the abused women who remain in violent relationships or victims of domestic violence mostly used multiple ways to resist and try to control violence rather than fighting back and developed relational aggression or indirect aggression. Thus this indirect aggression is shown in the form of self-harm (Bjoerkqvist, 1994; Dunn, & Powell-Williams, 2007; Jack, 1999). Ministry of Justice, London (2009) also supported current findings that half of the women prison population experience domestic violence (Ministry of Justice, 2009). Borrill et al. (2003) indicated that self harm had strong association with the history of violence either from family or friends, physical and sexual abuse (Borrill et al., 2003). This research also closely relates with the current findings.

It is also notable in current study results that women prisoners who indulge in self-harm had the history of drug usage. These findings are consistent with existing research evidences. McClellan et al. (1997) supported that drug usage by women is the stronger predictor of doing criminal acts and other destructive behaviors. Previous study results indicated that current living conditions, past histories of sexual abuse, domestic violence, rejection, bereavement, mental health issues, and distance from children made women prisoners vulnerable to self-harming acts (Kenning et al., 2010). These findings also supported current study results.
The current research hypothesis was that frequent traumatic life experiences increase the risk of self-harm in women prisoners. This hypothesis is also supported by existing research evidences. According to Messina and Grella (2006), 98 % risk of mental health problems increased for the women offenders who had 7 or more traumatic life experiences. Another research indicates that women prisoners have more trauma exposure in which 98 % is related with interpersonal problems, 71 % is linked with domestic violence, and depression is also present (Harris & Fallot, 2001). The current study also highlights the need for forensic psychologists in Pakistan prison setting. Gender specific trauma informed services should be provided in prison setting. Universities should provide training in psychological intervention related to prison settings. Moreover, prison settings should not left unattended and make the place where prisoners’ mental health will be affected badly.

CONCLUSION
This research revealed that mainly strict home environment, strained relationship, drug abuse, domestic violence, and separation from children during imprisonment serve the basis of self-harm among women prisoners. These findings demand psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers attention for playing a significant role in uplifting the status of women prisoners in terms of physical health, mental health, and at economic level.

Strengths and Limitations
This study was unique in its nature that it was pioneer research in Pakistani to study traumatic life experiences and self-harm in women prisoners together. The current study highlights the importance of psychological help which should be provided to women prisoners on top most priority for filling up the gaps in the availability of health care facilities.

Research conducting in prison setting has certain limitations and difficulties due to security reasons. Similarly certain limitations present in this research. Generalization of results is compromised due to the small sample size because small number of participants fulfilled the inclusion criteria of the research. Due to security reasons one matron was always present in the room during an interview process as a result women prisoners were hesitant to reveal their information. The presence of matron may affect the results. This was the main problem faced during the whole research process for getting their true information. It is suggested that qualitative research in this area would provide indepth understanding about the perceptions and reasons of self-harm among women prisoners.

Implications
The results of this study are helpful as in Pakistan it is very important to educate women prisoners about the concept of trauma and its effects on their lives. This aspect is one of core element in the rehabilitation of women prisoners and aim of this study is to highlight its importance. Gender specific trauma-informed services would be suggested to the women prisoners for their rehabilitation (Harris & Fallot, 2001). By making these efforts the incidence of self-harm among women prisoners would be lessen.

REFERENCES


**Acknowledgement**

This research was not funded project by an institution or organization. It was conducted in the partial fulfillment of MS in Clinical Psychology course requirement. We are very thankful to the higher authorities for allowing us to conduct this research in prison setting. We would like to thank to all participants who participated in this research.