



Silenced Twice : Emotional Avoidance and Policy Invisibility of Children of Incarcerated Mothers in India

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Abstract

Children of incarcerated mothers in India remain among the least visible populations within both psychological research and criminal justice policy. This paper introduces the concept of dual-layered silence to examine how these children are rendered invisible at two interconnected levels: the micro level of maternal emotional avoidance and the macro level of policy omission. At the psychological level, incarcerated mothers may suppress or avoid discussing their children as a trauma-mediated survival response shaped by guilt, helplessness, stigma, and carceral stress. Such emotional distancing should not be misread as lack of care, but as an adaptive coping mechanism under conditions of deprivation. At the structural level, Indian legal and policy frameworks rarely explicitly recognize children of incarcerated mothers as a distinct vulnerable group requiring targeted welfare, developmental, or psychosocial interventions. Drawing on Trauma Theory, the paper argues that these two silences are mutually reinforcing, producing what is conceptualized as the Carceral Silence Loop, a cyclical process in which institutional neglect deepens maternal helplessness, emotional suppression reduces advocacy visibility, and policy silence continues. Using deductive thematic analysis of incarcerated mothers' narratives alongside a policy mapping matrix of relevant Indian laws and correctional frameworks, the paper highlights how emotional and institutional silences sustain intergenerational disadvantage. It concludes by calling for child-inclusive prison policy, trauma-informed maternal support systems, and recognition of these children within child protection discourse.

INTRODUCTION

Parental incarceration is increasingly recognized as a significant childhood experience with long-term psychological, social, and developmental consequences for children (Murray & Farrington, 2008; Turney, 2018). Across global contexts, children of imprisoned parents often experience stigma, disrupted caregiving arrangements, economic instability, attachment insecurity, and emotional distress (Murray et al., 2009). Despite growing international scholarship on the effects of parental imprisonment, the experiences of children of incarcerated mothers remain comparatively underexamined, particularly in low-and middle-income countries where child welfare systems may be limited and prison environments are rarely designed with family wellbeing in mind (Richards & Jones, 2013).

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Maternal incarceration presents distinct challenges that differ from paternal imprisonment. In many societies, including India, mothers continue to function as primary caregivers, emotional anchors, and daily providers of care (Arditti, 2012). When mothers are imprisoned, children may experience abrupt separation, relocation to extended family care, institutional placement, or, in some cases, residence within prison during early childhood (Holmes, 2014)(Robertson-James & Núñez, 2012). Such disruptions may intensify feelings of abandonment, confusion, grief, and insecurity (Poehlmann, 2005). At the same time, incarcerated mothers themselves often endure severe emotional distress associated with separation from their children, guilt regarding disrupted caregiving, uncertainty about children's wellbeing, and chronic stress within custodial settings (Arditti & Few, 2006; Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010). However, maternal distress does not always manifest through open emotional expression or active advocacy for children's needs. Instead, some incarcerated mothers may avoid discussing their children, minimize emotional pain, or appear psychologically detached. This paper interprets such responses through Trauma Theory, which suggests that individuals exposed to overwhelming stress may rely on emotional numbing, avoidance, dissociation, or suppression as adaptive survival mechanisms (Herman, 1992; van der Kolk, 2014). Within prisons, where autonomy is restricted and reunification may feel uncertain, emotional avoidance can become a means of coping with unbearable helplessness. Therefore, silence surrounding children should not be simplistically interpreted as indifference or weakened maternal attachment.

Alongside this psychological silence exists a broader structural silence. In India, while prison manuals, legal protections, and child welfare mechanisms address women prisoners and children residing in prisons to some extent, children living outside prison after maternal incarceration often remain insufficiently recognized as a distinct vulnerable population (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2016; National Crime Records Bureau, 2022). Their emotional needs, educational continuity, stigma experiences, caregiving instability, and long-term psychosocial risks rarely receive systematic policy attention. This creates a gap between the lived realities of affected families and the categories recognized by institutional systems.

The present paper introduces the concept of dual-layered silence to explain this interconnected

invisibility. At the micro level, trauma-related maternal emotional avoidance may obscure children's needs within personal narratives. At the macro level, policy neglect and limited institutional recognition obscure these children within governance frameworks. Together, these forces generate a cyclical pattern termed the Carceral Silence Loop, wherein structural neglect intensifies maternal helplessness, emotional withdrawal reduces visibility of child concerns, and policy inaction persists.

Drawing on Trauma Theory, this paper examines how psychological coping processes and institutional omissions jointly shape the invisibility of children of incarcerated mothers in India. Through deductive thematic analysis of mothers' narratives and policy mapping of relevant Indian frameworks, the study seeks to contribute to trauma-informed scholarship, child welfare discourse, and prison reform debates.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The impact of incarceration extends beyond the imprisoned individual to family members whose lives are reshaped by separation, stigma, economic disruption, and emotional uncertainty. Over the last two decades, scholarship has increasingly recognized that children of incarcerated parents constitute a vulnerable population exposed to multiple developmental risks (Murray & Farrington, 2008; Turney, 2018). Yet despite this growing body of work, the specific experiences of children of incarcerated mothers remain comparatively understudied, particularly within the Global South. Existing literature often subsumes maternal imprisonment under broader discussions of parental incarceration, thereby overlooking the distinct caregiving, emotional, and social consequences associated with mothers' imprisonment. This review synthesizes literature across six major domains: parental incarceration as an adverse childhood experience, maternal incarceration and child outcomes, psychological experiences of incarcerated mothers, trauma and emotional avoidance, stigma and invisibility, and the Indian policy context.

Family Separation, Caregiving Disruption, and Developmental Instability

A central consequence of maternal incarceration is the disruption of family continuity and caregiving stability. Unlike broader discussions of parental imprisonment that often include both maternal and paternal experiences, maternal incarceration frequently produces immediate reorganization of a

child's daily life because mothers are commonly primary caregivers prior to imprisonment (Trice & Brewster, 2004). When mothers are removed from the household, children may experience abrupt changes in residence, separation from siblings, shifts in schooling, and dependence on grandparents, extended kin, or informal caregivers (Robertson, 2012).

Developmental psychology literature emphasizes that predictability, secure attachment, and consistent caregiving are foundational to healthy emotional growth (Howe, 2012). Sudden disruptions in routines and caregiving relationships can generate anxiety, behavioural dysregulation, grief reactions, and feelings of insecurity, particularly among younger children who may not fully understand the reasons for maternal absence. In the absence of age-appropriate explanations, children may interpret the separation as abandonment or punishment (Poehlmann, 2005).

Caregiving transitions following maternal imprisonment are not always inherently harmful, especially when children move into stable and supportive kinship environments. However, substitute caregivers may themselves face financial strain, health limitations, emotional stress, or social stigma. Grandparents caring for children may struggle with age-related burdens, while extended family placements can create overcrowding, inconsistent discipline, or conflict regarding contact with the incarcerated mother (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008).

Schooling is another domain commonly affected by caregiving instability. Residential relocation may require school transfers, irregular attendance, or withdrawal due to household stress. Children may also conceal family circumstances due to shame, limiting access to educational or counselling support (Testa & Jackson, 2021). Adolescents, particularly girls, may assume domestic or sibling-care responsibilities that interfere with academic engagement. From a trauma-informed perspective, repeated instability rather than a single separation event may be especially harmful. Children facing multiple transitions, home change, caregiver change, school change, reduced maternal contact, and social secrecy, may experience cumulative stress that shapes emotional regulation and trust in relationships (Melo & Ribeiro, 2020). Thus, maternal incarceration should be understood not only as a legal event affecting the mother, but as a family systems disruption with continuing developmental implications for children. This literature is particularly relevant to the present study because it highlights how children's needs can become obscured during

periods of family reorganization. While practical caregiving arrangements may receive immediate attention, children's emotional experiences often remain secondary or unspoken, laying the groundwork for the broader phenomenon of invisibility explored in this paper.

Psychological Experiences of Incarcerated Mothers

The literature on incarcerated women consistently identifies motherhood as one of the most psychologically salient aspects of imprisonment. Mothers in custody frequently report that separation from children is more painful than imprisonment itself (Arditti & Few, 2006). Feelings of guilt, grief, shame, longing, helplessness, and chronic worry about children's safety are common themes across qualitative studies (Poehlmann, 2005).

Many incarcerated mothers come from backgrounds marked by cumulative adversity including poverty, intimate partner violence, childhood abuse, substance dependence, and social exclusion (Bloom et al., 2003). These histories may heighten vulnerability to depression, post-traumatic stress, and relational insecurity during imprisonment. Thus, incarceration often compounds rather than initiates trauma.

Motherhood identity can become destabilized in prison. Women may feel they are failing culturally prescribed expectations of caregiving, sacrifice, and moral responsibility. Contact barriers such as distance, cost of travel, legal restrictions, family conflict, or child caregiver reluctance can intensify despair. Some mothers report feeling replaced in their children's lives or fearing emotional rejection after release (Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010). Despite these emotional burdens, not all mothers openly discuss children or visibly display distress. Some appear detached or avoidant, a phenomenon insufficiently theorized in carceral literature.

Trauma Theory and Emotional Avoidance

Trauma Theory offers a powerful explanation for emotional silence among incarcerated mothers. Herman (1992) argued that individuals exposed to prolonged helplessness often adapt through emotional numbing, fragmentation of memory, avoidance, or dissociation. These responses are not signs of indifference but mechanisms that enable psychological survival under overwhelming conditions.

Similarly, van der Kolk (2014) emphasizes that trauma can impair emotional processing and relational engagement. Individuals may suppress painful

attachments when reminders evoke unbearable grief or loss. For incarcerated mothers, thinking constantly about children without any ability to protect or care for them may produce intense helplessness. Emotional avoidance may therefore function as a defense against chronic sorrow. This is particularly relevant in prisons where autonomy is structurally restricted. Mothers cannot routinely comfort children, make educational decisions, monitor health, or regulate home environments. Under such conditions, sustained emotional engagement with maternal identity may itself become painful. Distancing from thoughts about children may preserve functioning within prison life. However, few studies explicitly connect trauma responses to maternal silence in prison narratives. Existing interpretations sometimes pathologize emotional distance as poor attachment, irresponsibility, or reduced maternal concern. A trauma-informed perspective challenges such assumptions and reframes silence as adaptive coping.

Stigma, Secrecy, and Social Exclusion

Children of incarcerated parents often experience what Goffman (1963) described as courtesy stigma - social discredit transferred through association with a stigmatized person. Families may conceal the incarceration from schools, neighbours, relatives, or even the children themselves to avoid shame and discrimination (Condry, 2013).

This secrecy can create significant psychological burdens. Children may be instructed not to disclose the parent's whereabouts, resulting in confusion, isolation, and blocked emotional processing. Without open acknowledgment, children may struggle to seek support from teachers, peers, or counsellors. Shame becomes internalized when the family's pain must remain hidden (Condry, 2010).

Maternal incarceration may generate intensified stigma because gender norms frequently frame women as natural caregivers and moral custodians of the household. When women are imprisoned, they are often judged not only as lawbreakers but as failed mothers who violated femininity and family expectations (Arditti, 2012). This double stigma affects both mothers and children. Scholars note that stigma also contributes to policy neglect. Populations perceived as morally tainted often receive limited public sympathy, reducing pressure for welfare intervention (Condry & Minson, 2021). Thus, stigma operates both socially and institutionally.

Policy Responses and Institutional Invisibility

Internationally, policy responses to children of prisoners remain uneven. Some countries have moved toward family-friendly visitation policies, child-sensitive arrest procedures, parenting programs, and recognition of children's rights during parental imprisonment (Robertson, 2012). Nevertheless, in many jurisdictions children remain invisible because criminal justice systems are organized around offenders rather than family consequences. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the Bangkok Rules (United Nations, 2011) encourage attention to children affected by maternal imprisonment, especially regarding contact, caregiving continuity, and alternatives to incarceration for primary caregivers. Yet implementation varies widely. Most correctional systems maintain data on prisoners but not systematically on dependent children. Without enumeration, children remain absent from budgets, services, and planning. This administrative invisibility has profound consequences: what is not counted is often not supported.

Indian Context: Women Prisoners and Their Children

In India, scholarship on incarceration has gradually begun addressing women prisoners, focusing on prison conditions, mental health, reproductive health, legal rights, and children residing inside prisons. The Model Prison Manual (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2016) includes provisions regarding pregnant prisoners, childcare facilities, nutrition, and nursery arrangements. Judicial interventions such as *R. D. Upadhyay v. State of Andhra Pradesh* (2006) advanced standards for children living with mothers in prison, including education, healthcare, food, and humane treatment. These developments are significant but primarily concern children residing inside prisons. Much less attention is given to children living outside after maternal incarceration. There is limited national data on how many children are separated from imprisoned mothers, where they reside, who assumes caregiving, whether schooling is disrupted, or what psychosocial support they receive.

Indian families often rely on kinship care systems, which can provide continuity but may also generate burdens on grandparents or economically vulnerable relatives. In some cases, stigma may lead families to conceal the mother's imprisonment, restrict contact, or sever ties. Despite these realities, systematic psychological research remains sparse. The National

Crime Records Bureau reports prison populations and women prisoner statistics, yet children affected externally remain largely invisible in official datasets (NCRB, 2022). This reflects a broader institutional tendency to define concern around the prisoner rather than the family ecosystem.

Conceptual Gap in Existing Literature

The literature reveals three central gaps. First, children of incarcerated mothers in India remain underrepresented in empirical psychological research. Second, maternal emotional silence has rarely been interpreted through trauma frameworks and is often misunderstood as lack of concern. Third, existing studies typically examine either family psychology or prison policy, but seldom the interaction between the two.

This paper addresses these gaps through the concept of dual-layered silence. At the micro level, trauma-mediated emotional avoidance may silence children's presence within maternal narratives. At the macro level, policy systems fail to explicitly recognize children of incarcerated mothers as a vulnerable group. These silences reinforce one another, producing what this paper terms the Carceral Silence Loop.

By integrating trauma psychology with policy analysis, the present study extends literature beyond descriptive accounts of hardship toward a systemic understanding of how invisibility is produced and sustained.

METHODOLOGY

The present study adopted a qualitative exploratory research design to examine how children of incarcerated mothers become rendered invisible through psychological and structural processes. Given the limited Indian scholarship on maternal incarceration and children's psychosocial experiences, a qualitative framework was considered appropriate for capturing depth, meaning, emotional complexity, and context-specific realities (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The study was guided by Trauma Theory, which informed the interpretation of emotional avoidance, silence, guilt, helplessness, and relational distress expressed in participants' narratives. The research employed deductive thematic analysis of narrative accounts collected from incarcerated mothers, alongside a complementary policy mapping exercise of relevant Indian prison and child welfare frameworks. Thematic analysis enabled systematic identification of recurring patterns within participants' experiences

while allowing interpretation through a trauma-informed lens (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Data were collected from one women's prison in India. The prison was selected based on institutional access, feasibility, and the presence of incarcerated mothers with dependent children. Conducting the study within a single institutional setting allowed deeper engagement with the lived experiences of the participants while ensuring contextual consistency in prison routines, visitation systems, and administrative practices.

The study included 30 incarcerated women prisoners who identified as mothers of dependent children. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, as the study specifically required women whose imprisonment had resulted in separation from children or altered caregiving arrangements.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Adult women prisoners currently incarcerated.
- Biological mothers to one or more children.
- Willingness to voluntarily participate.
- Psychological and physical ability to engage in an interview.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Women experiencing acute psychiatric distress at the time of data collection.
- Participants unable to provide informed consent.
- Women that were restricted to participate due to their legal or prison status.

The sample represented varied ages, family structures, sentence statuses, and durations of incarceration, allowing a range of maternal experiences to emerge.

Data were collected through semi-structured narrative interviews conducted individually with participants inside the prison premises in a private or administratively approved confidential setting. Semi-structured interviewing allowed consistency across broad topics while enabling participants to narrate experiences in their own words (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Interviews were conducted in languages comfortable to participants and later translated into English where necessary.

Given the vulnerability of incarcerated women, strict ethical safeguards were followed. Institutional permission was obtained from relevant prison authorities prior to data collection. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants after explaining the purpose of the study, confidentiality procedures, and the right to

withdraw at any stage without penalty. Participants' names and identifying details were removed, and pseudonyms/codes were used during transcription and reporting. Since discussions of children and separation could evoke distress, interviews were conducted sensitively, with the option to pause or discontinue at any time. Care was taken to avoid coercion in the custodial setting.

Interview data were analyzed using deductive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. The coding process was guided by trauma-informed sensitizing concepts such as, emotional avoidance, numbing, guilt and shame, etc. Through iterative review, broader themes were developed regarding maternal silence, emotional survival, disrupted caregiving, and perceived invisibility of children.

To complement interview findings, a policy mapping matrix was developed to review relevant Indian frameworks including:

Model Prison Manual (2016)

Prison Statistics India reports

Judicial guidelines concerning children of women prisoners

Child welfare and protection frameworks relevant to dependent children

The purpose of this component was to identify whether children of incarcerated mothers were explicitly recognized as a distinct vulnerable category and whether targeted psychosocial provisions existed. By combining narrative thematic analysis with policy mapping, the methodology enabled examination of both micro-level psychological experiences and macro-level institutional silences. This dual approach was especially suited to investigating the paper's central concept of dual-layered silence affecting children of incarcerated mothers.

RESULT

Narrative Interviews

Analysis of narrative interviews with 30 incarcerated mothers generated a set of interrelated themes reflecting how maternal imprisonment shaped emotional experiences, mother-child relationships, and perceptions of institutional neglect. The findings revealed that children were deeply present in mothers' emotional worlds, yet often absent in direct speech, decision-making power, and formal support systems. This paradox forms the basis of the paper's concept of dual-layered silence. Five major themes emerged:

(1) children as the silent center of maternal distress,

(2) emotional avoidance as psychological survival, (3) disrupted motherhood identity and helplessness, (4) invisible suffering of children outside prison, and (5) absence of institutional recognition.

Theme 1: Children as the Silent Center of Maternal Distress

Although many participants initially spoke about prison conditions, separation from their husbands, legal cases, or health concerns, deeper probing frequently revealed that concern for children was their most persistent source of distress. Mothers repeatedly described worrying about children's safety, education, emotional wellbeing, and caregiving arrangements. However, these concerns were often introduced indirectly, hesitantly, or after long pauses. Several participants stated that thinking about their children was "too painful," suggesting that children remained psychologically central despite limited verbal expression. Even when mothers did not spontaneously discuss their children, later portions of interviews revealed intense emotional preoccupation.

"If I start thinking about them, I cannot sleep." - (Participant 07)

"Everything is there in my mind, but I do not talk about it." - (Participant 14)

This theme suggests that silence should not be interpreted as absence of maternal concern. Rather, children occupied an emotionally charged but difficult-to-verbalize space in mothers' narratives.

Theme 2 : Emotional Avoidance as Psychological Survival

A prominent pattern across interviews was deliberate emotional distancing from thoughts about children. Participants described trying not to remember birthdays, avoiding conversations about home, limiting emotional reactions after visits, or suppressing memories in order to function within prison life. Many women reported that constant emotional engagement with motherhood created unbearable helplessness because they could not actively protect or care for their children. Avoidance therefore emerged as a coping mechanism.

"If I cry every day for my son, how will I survive here?" - (Participant 03)

"I keep my mind blank. Otherwise, I will break." - (Participant 19)

"After meeting them, I stay quiet for two days." - (Participant 11)

These narratives align with trauma-informed understandings of numbing, suppression, and

Emotional Avoidance and Policy Invisibility

adaptive withdrawal under conditions of prolonged stress (Herman, 1992; van der Kolk, 2014). Emotional silence functioned less as detachment and more as psychological self-preservation.

Theme 3: Disrupted Motherhood Identity and Helplessness

Participants frequently described imprisonment as a loss of motherhood role rather than merely loss of liberty. Mothers expressed pain over being unable to perform ordinary caregiving tasks such as cooking, helping with schoolwork, comforting illness, attending milestones, or disciplining children. Some women feared they were “no longer mothers” because grandparents or other caregivers had assumed parental responsibilities. Others worried children would forget them or emotionally bond with substitute caregivers. Some women reported that family members had severed contact after incarceration and did not permit children to visit, resulting in complete relational separation and intensifying feelings of helplessness, rejection, and loss of maternal identity.

“My mother is raising them now. Sometimes I feel they need her, not me.” - (Participant 09)

“A mother should be there when the child is sick. I cannot do anything.” - (Participant 22)

“What kind of mother am I from behind these walls?” - (Participant 05)

This theme reflects identity injury, guilt, and relational helplessness. For many women, incarceration destabilized the social and psychological meaning of motherhood.

Theme 4: Invisible Suffering of Children Outside Prison

Participants repeatedly voiced uncertainty regarding how children were coping outside prison. Mothers lacked reliable information about children's emotions, school experiences, peer treatment, health status, or daily routines. Several women suspected their children were facing stigma but had no way to intervene. Children living outside prison were perceived as suffering silently within extended family systems, schools, or neighbourhoods. Mothers reported that children often hid emotions during prison visits to avoid upsetting them.

“She smiles when she comes here, but I know she is not happy.” - (Participant 16)

“No one tells me what is happening in school.” - (Participant 02)

“People in the area know. Children also suffer because of my *paap*(bad deed).” - (Participant 27)

These accounts suggest that children's distress may remain unrecognized both by institutions and within family networks. Their suffering was frequently inferred rather than formally acknowledged.

Theme 5: Absence of Institutional Recognition

Participants reported minimal structured support related to parenting concerns, child communication, reunification planning, or emotional counselling focused on motherhood separation. While some women acknowledged access to basic visitation or occasional phone contact, few described systems that recognized their continuing maternal roles. Several mothers expressed that prison systems were organized around custody and discipline rather than family continuity. Emotional concerns regarding children were viewed as personal burdens rather than legitimate institutional matters.

“They ask about case dates, not about our children.” - (Participant 08)

“Meeting time is there, but no one asks what happens after children go.” - (Participant 21)

“Inside prison we are *Kaidi* (inmates) first, mothers later.” - (Participant 12)

This theme indicates that children of incarcerated mothers remained largely outside the scope of formal institutional concern, particularly when residing outside prison.

Across themes, a consistent pattern emerged: mothers emotionally silenced painful concerns about children in order to survive incarceration, while institutions structurally overlooked children's psychosocial needs. These two forms of silence appeared mutually reinforcing. When systems provided little recognition or support, mothers experienced greater helplessness. Greater helplessness encouraged emotional withdrawal. Emotional withdrawal, in turn, reduced visibility of children's unmet needs. This cyclical process supports the conceptual model proposed in this paper as the Carceral Silence Loop. Overall, the findings demonstrate that maternal incarceration affects children not only through physical separation, but through intertwined emotional and institutional silences that sustain invisibility.

Policy Mapping Matrix Results

The policy mapping component examined major Indian legal, correctional, and child welfare frameworks to assess whether children of incarcerated mothers are

Emotional Avoidance and Policy Invisibility

explicitly recognized as a distinct vulnerable population and whether targeted psychosocial protections exist. Documents reviewed included the Model Prison Manual (2016), relevant judicial directives, child protection frameworks, prison statistics reports, and broader welfare mechanisms applicable to vulnerable children. Overall, the policy review revealed a consistent pattern: while some provisions address women prisoners and children residing inside prisons, there is minimal direct recognition of children living outside prison following maternal incarceration. Support remains fragmented, indirect, or dependent on local administrative discretion. This finding strongly complements the narrative themes of institutional invisibility

Table 1 : Matrix Summary of Key Findings

Policy / Framework	Primary Focus	Recognition of Children of Incarcerated Mothers
Model Prison Manual (2016)	Prison administration and prisoner welfare	Partial recognition (mainly children inside prison)
R. D. Upadhyay v. State of Andhra Pradesh (2006)	Rights of children living with imprisoned mothers	Strong recognition of children residing in prison
Juvenile Justice Framework	Care and protection of vulnerable children	Indirectly applicable
Prison Statistics India	Administrative prison data	Counts women prisoners and some in-prison children
Child Welfare Schemes	General vulnerable children support	Indirect access possible

Theme 1: Recognition is Limited to Children Inside Prison

The strongest policy visibility was found for children who physically reside with mothers inside prison. Existing guidelines address nutrition, healthcare, bedding, crèche facilities, early education, clothing, and age-related procedures for children staying with incarcerated mothers. Judicial interventions have emphasized humane treatment and developmental safeguards. However, this

recognition is spatially conditional: children become visible when they are inside prison walls, but often disappear from policy concern once they live outside. This suggests that policy frameworks respond to custodial management needs more than long-term child welfare needs.

Theme 2: Children Outside Prison Remain Administratively Invisible

No reviewed framework systematically recognized children separated from incarcerated mothers as a standalone vulnerable category requiring monitoring or intervention. There were no consistent provisions related to, tracking where such children reside, their educational continuity after maternal incarceration, caregiver assessment after imprisonment and mental health support. There is no mention of any stigma reduction services, family reunification preparation or any periodic welfare review. This absence means that many children affected by maternal imprisonment may never enter any formal support pathway unless they face extreme neglect or abandonment.

Theme 3: Mothers Are Recognized as Prisoners, Not as Parents

The policy review showed that prison systems primarily classify women through custodial identity (undertrial, convict, sentence category, security status), while parenting identity receives secondary attention. Contact provisions such as visitation or phone calls exist, but structured parenting support was limited. There was little evidence of systematic programming such as, trauma-informed motherhood counselling, parenting from prison interventions, child-sensitive communication support, guided visitation preparation or reunification planning before release. This reflects an institutional orientation where women are managed as inmates first and mothers second.

Theme 4: Lack of Reliable Data Produces Policy Silence

A major structural issue identified through the matrix was the absence of routine national data on children affected by maternal incarceration outside prison. While prison populations, occupancy rates, and women prisoner numbers are documented, external dependent children are rarely counted. Without reliable data on, the number of affected children, their demographics, caregiving arrangements, school disruption, geographic distribution and mental health risk indicators, policy planning remains weak. Children

who are not counted remain difficult to support through budgets or dedicated schemes.

Theme 5: Child Protection Systems and Prison Systems Operate in Isolation

The matrix suggested limited integration between correctional institutions and child welfare systems. Prison administration, child protection bodies, schools, and community welfare systems appear to function in separate silos. This fragmentation increases the risk that children fall between systems.

The policy matrix demonstrates that invisibility is not merely emotional or interpersonal, it is bureaucratically produced. Existing frameworks acknowledge mothers as prisoners and acknowledge children when physically present in prison, but rarely recognize the broader population of children living outside prison due to maternal incarceration. This creates what the present paper terms structural silence: the absence of explicit categories, data systems, coordinated services, and trauma-informed policy responses for children of incarcerated mothers.

The review indicates that India possesses partial humanitarian protections for children residing with imprisoned mothers, but lacks a comprehensive trauma-informed framework for children separated due to maternal incarceration. Consequently, many such children remain outside both prison policy and mainstream child welfare visibility.

Table 2 : Comparison of Narrative and Policy Findings

Narrative Findings	Policy Findings
Mothers feel helpless about children	No structured systems for child follow-up
Children's suffering is uncertain and hidden	No routine monitoring of affected children
Mothers silence pain to cope	Institutions do not create spaces for parenting concerns
Maternal identity disrupted	Systems prioritize prisoner identity over parent identity

Together, these findings support the broader concept of dual-layered silence, where psychological suppression and policy omission reinforce one another.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the impact of maternal incarceration extends beyond physical separation and is deeply shaped by psychological coping processes and institutional

omissions. Through analysis of incarcerated mothers' narratives and the policy mapping matrix, the study identified a recurring pattern in which children remained emotionally central to mothers' experiences, yet socially and administratively peripheral. This supports the central argument of the paper that children of incarcerated mothers in India experience dual-layered silence.

At the psychological level, limited verbal expression of mothers regarding children should not be interpreted as lack of attachment or concern. Consistent with Trauma Theory, many participants appeared to use emotional avoidance, suppression, and distancing as survival responses to chronic helplessness, guilt, and separation distress (Herman, 1992; van der Kolk, 2014). Because mothers had little control over children's lives during incarceration, sustained emotional engagement often became painful. Silence therefore functioned as a coping mechanism rather than emotional absence.

At the relational level, imprisonment disrupted maternal identity. Many women described pain over being unable to perform everyday caregiving roles and feared emotional replacement by substitute caregivers. In some cases, family members had severed contact and prevented children from visiting, intensifying feelings of rejection and loss. These findings suggest that incarceration can destabilize not only family structure but also a mother's sense of self.

The policy analysis revealed that institutional concern remains largely restricted to children residing inside prisons, while children living outside after maternal incarceration remain insufficiently recognized. Existing systems provide limited mechanisms for tracking caregiving transitions, educational disruption, emotional wellbeing, or reunification needs. This indicates that the suffering of these children is not only private but structurally overlooked.

Taken together, the findings support the concept of the Carceral Silence Loop. Institutional neglect increases maternal helplessness; helplessness encourages emotional withdrawal; and emotional withdrawal further reduces visibility of children's needs. Thus, psychological and structural silences mutually reinforce one another.

The study has important practical implications. Trauma-informed prison services should include motherhood counselling, supported child contact, and reunification planning. Child welfare systems should explicitly recognize children of incarcerated mothers

as a vulnerable group requiring educational, emotional, and caregiving support. Better coordination between prisons, families, and child protection agencies is essential.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the overlooked experiences of children of incarcerated mothers in India through the framework of dual-layered silence and demonstrated, through thematic analysis of narratives from 30 women prisoners and a policy mapping exercise, that these children are rendered invisible through two interconnected processes: maternal emotional silence shaped by trauma and institutional silence shaped by policy neglect. Although mothers remained deeply concerned about their children, many coped with separation, guilt, helplessness, and uncertainty through emotional avoidance, suppression, and psychological distancing, indicating that silence should be understood as a survival response rather than absence of care. At the same time, existing policy frameworks provided only limited recognition of children living outside prison after maternal incarceration, leaving issues such as caregiving instability, stigma, emotional distress, disrupted education, and reunification needs insufficiently addressed. These findings support the concept of the Carceral Silence Loop, wherein institutional neglect intensifies maternal helplessness, maternal withdrawal reduces visibility of children's needs, and policy inaction continues across generations. The study contributes to trauma-informed understandings of imprisonment by reframing maternal incarceration as not merely an individual legal consequence but a family-centered psychosocial disruption with intergenerational implications. However, certain limitations must be acknowledged: the research was based on a relatively small sample of 30 incarcerated mothers from one prison, which may limit generalizability across prisons, states, and sociocultural settings; the findings relied primarily on mothers' narratives and did not directly include the voices of children, caregivers, prison staff, or policymakers; and as a qualitative inquiry, the emphasis was on interpretive depth rather than statistical representation. Future research should therefore expand to multi-site and comparative studies across regions, include children's and caregivers' perspectives, and employ longitudinal designs to examine the long-term effects of maternal incarceration on mental health, identity development, educational continuity, and family reunification.

Quantitative studies may further assess the prevalence of trauma, stigma, and caregiving instability among affected children. At the policy level, future work should focus on trauma-informed prison reforms, child-sensitive visitation systems, parenting support interventions, coordinated linkages between prisons and child welfare institutions, and improved national data systems documenting dependent children affected by maternal incarceration. Ultimately, children of incarcerated mothers remain a hidden population whose visibility is essential not only for scholarship but for child rights, social justice, and humane correctional reform.

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