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Challenges and Strategies for Conducting Prison Research in Bangladesh: Insights from a Study on Women Prisoners

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ABSTRACT

In Bangladesh, prison research has many challenges. This article has explored the challenges of prison research with overcoming strategies, which have been drawn from the author's PhD research work. A mixed methodological approach was used here. This article has been developed based on the findings of the observation method regarding gaining access to the prison and interviewing female criminals. Of many challenges, the bureaucratic hurdles in gaining legal permission for prison access and the complexities of interviewing incarcerated female offenders were especially difficult. Gaining access to prison was an arduous and prolonged process, including multiple government officials and official interviews. In the prison, the author faced emotional, logistical, and ethical challenges from the prisoners. The author also had to deal with prisoners' mistrust, emotional trauma, rigid routines, and volatile environments. Adapting to prison rules, coping with personal anxieties, and maintaining balanced relations between prison staff and inmates were critical challenges as well. However, rapport-building was a useful strategy to obtain reliable data, achieved through empathy, cultural sensitivity, and informal interactions. In addition, institutional MoUs, consistent communication with authorities, and trust with respondents through transparency and respect were strategies for addressing challenges. Despite many challenges, this study can be marked as a pioneering effort in Bangladeshi prison research, offering critical insights and strategic guidance for future researchers.

1. Introduction

Researchers usually face different types of unavoidable challenges while conducting research in prison or correctional facilities (Liebling, 1999; Lucic-Catic, 2011; Jewkes, 2014; Sutton, 2017). In many countries, prisons are treated as restricted institutions for gaining access to academic researchers (Shen, 2015). Even in Western countries, such as in the United States, a few studies are conducted in prison and rarely institutionally embraced (Simon, 2000; Morgan, 2002; Wacquant, 2002; Philips & Earle, 2010). There has been some reluctance from the management of the prisons to allow outsiders to meet with inmate respondents for three reasons. Firstly, they consider it a potential threat to the prison's safety. Secondly, they think, the entrance of outside researchers disrupts the prison routine. Thirdly, it seems to them that the research does not have any immediate benefit for prisons (Newman, 1958).

Unlike other types of social research interviewing, researchers encounter a range of problems when conducting interviews in prison (Newman, 1958).

These challenges are mostly arising due to some unique characteristics of prison settings and also to the complicated lives of prisoners (Sutton, 2017). Downing Polzer and Levan (2013) stated these factors as foreground and background dynamics. According to them, "Foreground dynamics involve the physical, practical elements of research space...and background components involve the lived realities of respondents." The intense, risk-laden, and fraught environment of prison creates difficulties, dilemmas, complexities, and contradictions (Liebling, 1999; Jewkes, 2014). On the other hand, closed and crowded living conditions as well as deprivation trigger stress and anxiety among prisoners in their daily lives (Philips & Earle, 2010). Thus, research in a prison environment requires researchers to adapt constantly to unpredictable situations (Lucic-Catic, 2011). In Bangladesh, very few studies are conducted in prison settings. Rahman and Hossain (1984) conducted a study on female prisoners in Dhaka Central Jail to reveal the relationship between female criminality and their distinct personalities. Firoze *et al.* (1995) led a short survey to

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find out the conditions of detainees, mainly female prisoners in Dhaka Central Jail of Bangladesh. Kashem (1996) explained the conditions and problems of jails in Bangladesh based on the data collected from six different jails in the country. Faruk *et al.* (2009) explained the nature and causes of female criminality in Bangladesh based on a short survey in the Tangail District Jail. Banu *et al.* (2010) focused on the prevalence and drug resistance of pulmonary tuberculosis (TB) in Dhaka Central Jail in Bangladesh. Faruk (2015) conducted another study on female prisoners in Tangail District Jail and Dhaka Central Jail (Part 3), Kashimpur, Gazipur, to identify the different contributing factors of female criminality in Bangladesh. Although researchers at different times conducted these studies in prison, none of them addressed any challenges and /or strategies of prison research in the country. This study is a pioneering attempt in this regard. This article aims to uncover the challenges of gaining access to the prison and interviewing the female criminals in prison settings from Bangladesh perspective. It also explores the strategies to overcome these challenges.

2. Methodology

Ethnography is dominantly used for conducting research in a prison environment (Clemmer, 1940; Sykes, 1958; Reiter, 2014; Drake *et al.*, 2015). However, alternative methods, such as surveys (Sutton, 2011), in-depth interviews (Shen, 2015), mixed method approaches (Saxena, 1994; Harvey, 2007; Jenness, 2010), and focus group discussion (Naylor, 2015), have also been found as potential methods of prison research. My PhD research, titled “Causes of and Interventions to Female Criminality: A Study on Imprisoned Criminals in Bangladesh” employed a mixed-methods approach. The study was conducted across three central prisons in Bangladesh: Kashimpur Women’s Central Jail, Rajshahi Central Jail, and Rangpur Central Jail. For quantitative data, social survey methods were used. On the other hand, qualitative data were collected by using case studies, observation, and Key informant interviews (KIIs). The participation of the respondents in this research was voluntary. The oral consent of each respondent was secured before interviewing. From an ethical point of view, an adequate standard was ensured to avoid any exposure to the respondent’s physical and psychological harm. In addition, no identification-related information was documented in all cases to maintain participants’ anonymity and privacy. This article has explored the challenges and strategies of conducting research in prisons in Bangladesh, with a particular focus on gaining access to the prison as the study area, as well as interviewing the female criminals in prison settings. The qualitative data from the observation was discussed under different themes. Several studies based on researchers’ experiences in jail settings (Lucic-Catic, 2011; Ferszt & Chambers, 2011; Apa *et al.*, 2012; Sivakumar, 2021) served as valuable methodological guides for this exploration.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. Challenges of Gaining Access to Prisons — the Study Areas

3.1.1. Lengthy Bureaucratic Procedure

In Bangladesh, securing permission to conduct prison research is a challenging task. There is a legal obligation to conduct prison research to obtain permission from the Ministry of Home Affairs (Kashem, 1996). In this research, the initial challenge was to gain permission from the legal authority for data collection in prison. A lengthy bureaucratic procedure was required to gain access to the prison. During my planning to do PhD research on female criminality, I had a meeting with the Inspector General of Prisons (IG Prison), who came to our department [Department of Criminology and Police Science, Mawlana Bhasani Science and Technology University (MBSTU), Tangail, Bangladesh] to conduct an academic session. It was an opportunity to share my research interest in female criminality with the IG Prison in detail. He assured me that, being a faculty member of Criminology and Police Science and also a female researcher, it would not be a matter of difficulty for me to secure permission for collecting data on female prisoners in prison.

At the end stage of my PhD coursework at the Department of Sociology, University of Rajshahi, Bangladesh, I contacted the IG Prison for permission regarding data collection. In the meantime, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the Department of Criminology and Police Science, MBSTU, and the Prison Directorate of Bangladesh. The MoU program was a platform where the IG Prison described how to secure permission for data collection from the prison authority. Accordingly, in February 2017, an application to the Secretary of the Ministry of Home Affairs through the IG Prison, along with several required documents (such as my complete biodata with photo, research proposal, supervisor’s recommendation letter, and draft questionnaire of my doctoral research), was submitted.

Continuous communication with the Prison Headquarters was an important step. I had a long effort to secure permission from the prison authority. Getting no response for three months after the prison authority sent the application to the Ministry of Home Affairs, I communicated again to the authority of Prison Headquarters, which suggested I should contact the Ministry of Home Affairs. When I communicated, I found the application was stagnant at a desk and required more time to place it with the top authority. Contact again after a few weeks with the Ministry of Home Affairs was responded with same reply. They said, the top person was busy, and the word was harsher at this time. Even they raised the question about my selection of research topic on prison affairs. This delay was a bit frustrating and a test of patience.

Seeing this delay, the prison authority came to help in this regard. The Prison Headquarters wrote two letters, one after another, to the authority of the Ministry of Home Affairs to give feedback regarding my permission

procedure. However, the authority did not respond. By this time, my supervisor also warned me about my delay and argued that receiving no permission for field work in prison from the authority of the Ministry of Home Affairs would be unwise to go for the registration of a PhD seminar. Rather, he advised me to rethink my research area. This expression from the supervisor made an extra burden and put me in a fix. In this case, no alternative way I had except to rush again to the IG Prison, who suggested sharing the fact with another personnel of the Ministry of Home Affairs. In the meantime, I approached the then top authority of my university (Mawlana Bhashani Science and Technology University), who took the responsibility to talk to the Ministry of Home Affairs as the higher authority was familiar to him. Fortunately, it worked well, and finally, I got an appointment with the Secretary on 17 September 2017.

3.1.2. Facing an Interview and Convincing the Authority of the Ministry of Home Affairs

I reached the Secretariat on the due date, one hour before my appointment time. I met with the Additional Secretary there. He was busy in a meeting and requested me to wait in the Senior Assistant Secretary's room. After going there, the Senior Assistant Secretary said that the Secretary was attending some urgent meetings and asked me to wait until he came back. I waited there for a long time, and it was almost lunchtime. Though the Senior Assistant Secretary suggested having the launch at the canteen of the Secretariat, I expressed my unwillingness to go there because I did not want to take minimum risks with my appointment.

I noticed, about four hours later, the Secretary arrived at his room after finishing his meeting. Within a short time, I received a call from the room of Secretary. The Additional Secretary and, fortunately, the IG Prison were also present there. Firstly, the Secretary expressed his unwillingness to grant my permission. He commented that prisons are a very sensitive sector in Bangladesh. He even said that no one had received permission to conduct such academic research in the Bangladeshi prison earlier. Then, he asked me, and thus I described the purposes and the rationalities of my research. After hearing me, he asked the IG Prison to know about my research as well. IG prison confirmed that he checked all my documents,

along with the research proposal and questionnaire, thoroughly and then forwarded my application to him (the Secretary). He also mentioned the MoU between my department (Criminology and Police Science) and the Prison Directorate. Then the Secretary argued that “we may provide 10 to 15 female criminals at the visitor's room of the prison for your data collection”. I tried to convince him that it would not fulfill the purpose of my PhD research. Then he agreed to permit data collection for a very short time. I requested him to give me permission for one year, but he did not agree with me. By observing his rigidity, I requested him to allow me at least six months, as three central jails were my study area. Lastly, he became convinced to allow me to collecting data for three months. But he assured me that if it required more time, he might consider it next time.

3.1.3. Ministry of Home Affairs' Permission with Conditions

I received a permission letter from the Ministry of Home Affairs, which had taken about eight months. The authority issued the permission for three months with some conditions. Firstly, I was prohibited from carrying any illegal goods and arms. Not allowed to carry mobile phones, cameras, recorders, and even any kind of food into the prison. Secondly, I was certainly required to maintain all types of security during fieldwork in prison by myself, as authorities would not take any responsibility for my security in conducting interviews with different types of prisoners. Thirdly, mandatorily, I am required to maintain clause 3 of section 661 of the first part of the Jail Code, which simply means that without permission from the authority, it is prohibited for me to remove anything from the prison as well as to supply anything to the prisoners. After three months of fieldwork, I applied for an extension of three months. However, the authority extended only one month for data collection in prison. This time, they mentioned in my permission letter that, “this time will be treated as the last time for me”. From the experience of prison research, Lucic-Catic (2011) rightly argued, “Gaining access to prison as an academic researcher requires knowledge of the rules and regulations, but it also requires ingeniousness”. The summary of the challenges and strategies in gaining access to prisons has been presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Challenges and Strategies: Gaining Access to the Prison.

Key Challenges	Strategies
Lengthy bureaucratic procedure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prior consultation with the prison authority • Supplying all required documents • Constantly maintaining communication with key personnel
Getting an appointment as a secretary for an interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recalling the IG prison about his prior assurance for getting permission • Identifying a familiar person of a secretary • Waiting passionately long time (more than 4 hours) for an interview without moving anywhere for a while
Convincing authority on the timeframe of fieldwork	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlighting the MoU between my working department (Criminology and Police Science) and the Bangladesh prison • Focusing on the gender issues

However, the scenario in other countries is also not very different. Gaining prison access for research typically involves significant bureaucratic challenges, such as extensive paperwork, multiple background checks, and securing permissions from various institutional and governmental bodies. These administrative layers often result in lengthy delays, communication inconsistency, and scheduling uncertainty. In a Western country like the United States of America (USA), this scenario is not similar to Bangladesh, though gaining permission is not easy. Long systematic procedures were described in a study conducted Apa and his group (Apa *et al.*, 2012). Negotiating with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and achieving a certificate from the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) Division of Policy and Assurance were great hurdles for securing permission from the Prison author in the USA. However, securing permission for prison research in India is almost similar to Bangladesh. Sivakumar (2021) described it as the first impediment for conducting prison research in India. Additionally, in China, political sensitivity is identified by researcher as a significant barrier to accessing prisoners for academic research (Shen, 2015). Such challenges compromise the feasibility, scope, and timeline of empirical studies conducted in the prison setting (Drake & Harvey, 2014; Jewkes, 2011).

3.2. Challenges of Interviewing in Prison

3.2.1. Coping with Anxiety and Fear

Different types of challenges were there in conducting prison research. It had considerable anxiety and fear about entering the prison and particularly about interviewing prisoners. In this study, most of the respondents were convicted of violent crimes and drug offenses. Among the violent criminals, murderers were predominant in number, and it was one of the biggest fears how tough it would be to handle them. Even, it was a concern how I should dress, act, and respond to those prisoners and staff. Specifically, nervousness seized at the moment of the first entrance into the Rajshahi Central Jail and the Rangpur Central Jail. My entrance to the female prisoners' ward of these jails was guarded by a uniformed staff member holding a rod that he was whacking on the ground. My nervousness reached its height when I noticed some curious male criminals on the way to my entrance to the female prisoners' ward. Sivakumar (2021) has shared a similar experience from her PhD research in the prisons of Kerala in India:

"During my initial visits to prison, I noticed that people in prison, whether it is the officials or the visitors, were interested in me, as the number of women who visit male prisons is negligible. My interactions with the guard and my entry into the prison premises made them curious." I felt more insecure when I observed that the uniformed female staff were also going through the same security procedure to get into the jail. I endured the raised eyebrows of the male prisoners during every visit to prison. Considering the situation, I kept my eyes down

and tried to cross the way to the entrance of the female ward within a short time.

Even I had to remain disconnected from all types of communication networks because, as per the condition of permission, I was not allowed to keep my mobile phone with me during my fieldwork in prison. This also caused tense and fearful feelings in me all the time of stayed in prison.

3.2.2. Rapport Building with the Respondents

In social sciences research, the setting of interviews is considered most important to build rapport and to acquire reliable responses (Newman, 1958). It is very difficult and time-consuming to build rapport and gain the trust of the respondents in research in prison settings (Marquart, 1986). In the present research, a major challenge during the initial phase of data collection was to convince different types of respondents. I had to pay much attention and caution in gaining their trust, and in building rapport with the female prisoners for interviewing.

Initially, the respondents were very reluctant to talk to me. They resentfully informed that many people (prison officials and related others) from different affiliations came and they provided them detailed information, but none of them took any initiative or opportunity to change the life of female prisoners. The opening of data collection was a difficult and discouraging part of this research.

At first, most of the respondents from different categories expressed their unwillingness to participate in an interview. Particularly, those respondents who had already served a major part of their prison sentences were more reluctant about the research. They claimed that this research would not provide any immediate benefits for them. On the other hand, relatively new offenders were suspicious by thinking that I might be collecting data secretly as the representative of the criminal justice system, and that could adversely affect their sentences of imprisonment. Drug-related offenders thought that this information might help identify their partners for further investigations of their crimes. Even sexual offenders were more anxious about their social status in prison as well as in society. All the respondents frequently asked about my personal identity and research purposes. I always provided accurate information about my background and research purposes in detail to secure their trust. I encouraged them to share my research purposes with other educated inmates and their visitors to lessen and/or remove their misconceptions and any kind of rumors. I frequently reassured them that their information and/or data must not be disclosed to any staff of the prison and not to anyone else. The confidentiality of their information and/or data must be maintained at any cost. This reassurance was made to gain their trust and build rapport with reluctant and/or apprehensive respondents. I always interacted with the respondents in a very informal way and addressed them with suitable kin terms by considering their age. I interacted with the

respondents as other normal individual rather than as a convicted one. It was found very effective to narrow the distance between them and me, and consequently to build rapport with them. Finally, such an easy-going situation made my data collection from the female prisoners easier and more fruitful for my research.

It is important to mention that some officials of prison management made a significant contribution to creating a good rapport with the female prisoners during my fieldwork. Before starting my fieldwork, I got an offer from the prison headquarters to conduct some academic sessions in the training program of prison officials in different batches. It was an opportunity for me to be introduced to the different levels of personnel of prison management through conducting these sessions in the Prison Training Academy, Rajshahi, and training held in the Kashimpur jail premises. Even, I got those officials on duty in the female ward during my fieldwork with whom I conducted sessions in their training period. My affable familiarity with those higher to lower-level prison management personnel ensured me the trust of respondents.

3.2.3. Handling the Stress and Emotion of the Respondents

Another challenge was to handle the stress and emotions of many of my respondents. Specifically, some of them had dependent children; some lost their nearest one during imprisonment; most of them got divorced, some were not visited by their nearest one, and/or nobody for a long time. All of them became more emotional while I was conducting interviews with them. It was more sensitive among the respondents who were convicted of killing their close ones. I always shared their feelings with respect and gave them mental support to overcome their psychological stress. Even sometimes they requested me to allow them to touch my hand to get emotional support to be relieved. I tried to respect their emotions all the way.

3.2.4. Coping with the Prison Rules and Routine Work of the Prisoners

Wakai *et al.* (2009) described “Correctional facilities traditionally have relied on a bureaucratic, paramilitary organizational configuration that is, by definition, hierarchical, routinized, risk-averse, and security-focused”. Usually, prisoners are kept under 24-hour surveillance by the authority of prison. In the present study, I always had

to adjust to the prison rules and the routine work of the prisoners to conduct interviews with the respondents. Particularly, rigorously imprisoned prisoners are bound to do their assigned work in prison. Thus, in prison research, it is uncertain for the researcher how many interviews he/she will be able to conduct in a day. Here, researcher needs a more patient and adaptive mentality than in any other social sciences research setting. Often, I had to depend on the mood of the respondents and whether they were willing to sit for an interview. Sometimes, they expressed unwillingness to interview by saying that they were not feeling good today due to headaches or other reasons. They even refused me by saying that they were watching a movie on television, so it would be better if I called them for an interview on an alternative day.

3.2.5. Adjustment to a Violent and Fearful Environment

Compared to the experiences of fieldwork in other research, I had to cope with the violent and fearful situation during the data collection from the prisoners in prison settings. Fighting and quarreling, and the use of slang among the respondents for silly reasons were very common phenomena of prison life. Even, sometimes, such violent activities interrupted my data collection activities. Thus, I had to bear insecure feelings and tensions all the time during my data collection in prison, as a significant percentage of my respondents were convicted of violent crimes. Sometimes the adverse environment of prison creates intense pressure and complexities for the researcher (Liebling, 1999; Jewkes, 2014). Thus, I always maintained a balanced relationship with my respondents and the administrative staff of the prison. I knew that one misinformation about my presence in the prison would be enough to impose restrictions on my entrance into prison or to disrupt my plan of fieldwork. Thus, I was alert all the time in dealing with my respondents and staff.

However, being a female researcher, I had some advantages there in dealing with female prisoners. I could venture into all the sections of the female ward including their living room to other areas that were inaccessible to a male researcher. This opportunity helped me to become closer to the respondents. I candidly explained my role and convinced the respondents about my purpose of this study. The summary of challenges and strategies in interviewing prisoners has been presented in the following Table 2.

Table 2: Challenges and Strategies: Interviewing in Prison.

Key Challenges	Strategies
Researcher's safety and security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keeping my eyesight down, and tried to cross the way to the entrance of the female ward within a possible short time. • Introducing myself with the help of a responsible prison officer • Sharing affable familiarity with higher to lower-level prison management personnel
Rapport building and gaining the trust of the prisoners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addressing them with suitable kin terms by considering their age • Providing my professional information with a contact number • Encouraging them to share my purpose with other educated inmates and their visitors • Assuring the individual privacy of the prisoners

Handling the stress and emotions of different types of prisoners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hearing them passionately with empathy • Allowing them to touch my hand
Adjustment with prison rules and prisoners' daily routine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paying more attention to the prison rules • Avoiding the use of the word "no" • Helping prisoners to feel more empowered by valuing their opinions
Adjustment with prison rules and prisoners' daily routine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoiding more interaction with the staff in front of prisoners • Sharing positive impressions of staff and prisoners with each other • Keeping myself more alert at all times

Interviewing in prison presents challenges such as security concerns, mistrust from inmates, and ethical complexities. Researchers are required to navigate institutional rules and emotional tensions, which can affect data quality and participant openness (Sutton, 2017). Lucic-Catic (2011) in a study focusing on the penitentiary system of Bosnia and Herzegovina, underscored the challenges of selecting appropriate methodology, the critical role of emotional expression and narrative accounts offered by inmates, prison staff, and researchers during interviews in prison. Additionally, trust gained from the prisoners and rapport-building were among many to handle challenges in interviewing prisoners in the United States and India as well (Apa *et al.*, 2012; Sivakumar 2021). To address these obstacles, careful planning and sensitivity are required.

4. Conclusion

Prison research in Bangladesh has an array of challenges, such as bureaucratic barriers and emotional stress during fieldwork. Nonetheless, the researchers can successfully address these challenges through persistence, strategic engagement, and empathy. Moreover, institutional support and flexible research approaches are required. The observation and guidance of this article will offer valuable insights for future scholars who are interested in prison research.

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