



The Mistreatment of Women in Closed Institutions: A Study of Hostels, Shelters, and Rehabilitation Centers

Kajal

Assistant Professor, Saraswati Vidhya Mandir Law College, Shikarpur, Bulandshahr, Uttar Pradesh, India

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17964627>

Corresponding Author: Kajal

Abstract

This paper investigates the systemic mistreatment of women and girls residing in closed institutions designed for their protection, care, and rehabilitation. While hostels for working women, domestic violence shelters, and substance abuse or mental health rehabilitation Centers are established with ostensibly benevolent aims, they often become sites of coercion, abuse, and rights violations. Through a qualitative synthesis of secondary data-including NGO reports, judicial inquiries, survivor testimonies, and academic literature-this study identifies common patterns of mistreatment across institutional types. These include physical and psychological abuse, restrictive and punitive regimes, denial of autonomy, inadequate living conditions, lack of grievance mechanisms, and the exploitation of labor under the guise of "therapy" or "discipline." The analysis employs a feminist theoretical framework, arguing that such mistreatment is rooted in patriarchal control, the carceral logic of institutionalization, and the erosion of personhood for marginalized women (including those from low-income, minority, or disabled backgrounds). The paper further examines the failure of state oversight and regulatory capture that allows these abuses to persist. It concludes that the current institutional model often replicates the very harms it claims to mitigate. The recommendations call for a paradigm shift towards rights-based, community-integrated, non-custodial support services that prioritize resident agency, robust independent monitoring, and transformative accountability mechanisms.

Keywords: Institutional Mistreatment, Gender-Based Violence, Closed Institutions, Women's Shelters, Rehabilitation Centers, Autonomy and Coercion, Patriarchal Control, Rights Violations, Regulatory Failure, Community-Based Alternatives

1. Introduction

Closed institutions for women, such as hostels, shelters, and rehabilitation centers, occupy a paradoxical space in the social landscape. Formally, they are sanctuaries offering refuge from violence, homelessness, addiction, or societal stigma. Informally, and with alarming frequency, they transform into spaces of confinement and control, where inhabitants experience various forms of mistreatment. This research paper argues that the mistreatment within these settings is not a series of isolated incidents but a systemic outcome of structural inequalities, patriarchal oversight, and the inherent power imbalances of institutional life. This study synthesizes evidence from diverse geographical contexts to map the contours of this abuse, analyze its underpinnings, and propose alternative pathways for genuine support and empowerment.

2. Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

Existing literature on total institutions (Goffman, 1961) ^[3] provides a foundational understanding of how institutional settings strip individuals of their identity and autonomy. Feminist scholars have extended this analysis to gender-specific institutions, highlighting how they become instruments for policing female sexuality, morality, and social roles (Chesney-Lind, 2006) ^[2]. Research on carceral feminism critiques the tendency to address violence against women through increased surveillance and confinement, which can inadvertently subject them to state-sanctioned control (Bumiller, 2008) ^[1]. Studies on shelters and rehabilitation centers often reveal a tension between protection and paternalism, where rules designed for safety morph into oppressive disciplinary regimes (Koyama, 2006) ^[5]. This paper sits at the intersection of these discourses,

employing a feminist socio-legal framework to analyze mistreatment as a violation of bodily integrity, autonomy, and fundamental human rights.

3. Materials and Methods

This desk-based research employs a qualitative thematic analysis of secondary sources. Data is drawn from:

- Investigative reports by national and international human rights organizations (e.g., Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International).
- Judicial commissions of inquiry and court rulings pertaining to institutional abuse.
- Academic scholarship in sociology, criminology, gender studies, and social work.
- Documented survivor narratives and media investigations.

The analysis identifies recurring themes of abuse across different types of institutions, focusing on patterns rather than isolated geography-specific cases to establish systemic critique.

4. Patterns of Mistreatment: A Comparative Analysis

4.1 Hostels for Women and Working Women's Hostels

Often marketed as safe havens for migrants and students, these hostels frequently enforce regressive moral policing. Mistreatment includes:

- **Draconian Rules:** Curfews, restrictions on visitors (especially men), surveillance of movements, and control over personal communication.
- **Moral Policing:** Mandatory character certificates, punitive responses to perceived "immoral" behavior, and eviction threats based on moral judgments.
- **Exploitative Conditions:** Overcrowding, poor sanitation, and exorbitant fees for substandard facilities.

4.2 Domestic Violence Shelters and Crisis Homes

While lifesaving, shelters can fail their residents through:

- **Coercive Control:** Removing agency by making all decisions for residents "for their own good."
- **Forced Reconciliation:** Pressuring women to return to abusive families under the guise of preserving family Honor or due to limited resources.
- **Psychological Abuse:** Humiliation, stigmatization of certain residents (e.g., sex workers, LGBTQ+ individuals), and creating atmospheres of fear.
- **Neglect:** Providing inadequate psychological, legal, or financial support for true independence.

4.3 Rehabilitation Centers (Substance Abuse, Mental Health, "Corrective" Homes)

These sites exhibit the most egregious forms of abuse, often under a veneer of therapy:

- **Physical and Psychological Torture:** Beatings, chaining, solitary confinement, forced medication, and verbal abuse termed as "tough love" or "disciplinary measures."
- **Medical Negligence:** Lack of qualified professionals, unscientific treatment methods, and denial of proper healthcare.
- **Forced Labor:** Inmates compelled to work for the institution's profit under the label of "occupational

therapy."

- **Arbitrary Detention:** Women admitted against their will by families or authorities, with no legal recourse to challenge their confinement.

5. Structural Drivers of Abuse

- **Patriarchal and Carceral Logic:** Institutions often act as extensions of familial and societal control, aiming to "correct" women who deviate from prescribed norms rather than empower them.
- **Marginalization of Inhabitants:** The abuse is enabled by the social and economic marginality of residents (poor, disabled, caste/ethnic minorities, sex workers, etc.), whose voices are systematically silenced.
- **Regulatory Vacuum and Corruption:** Weak licensing regimes, infrequent and announced inspections, lack of transparency, and collusion between owners and local officials.
- **Funding and Resource Scarcity:** Chronic underfunding leads to overcrowding, poor staff training, and a survival-mode operation that prioritizes control over care.

6. Case for Paradigm Shift: From Institutionalization to Integration

The evidence compels a move away from the closed institution model. Recommendations include:

- **Promoting Rights-Based, Community-Integrated Services:** Scaling up non-residential support, crisis apartments, and community outreach programs that allow women to remain in their social networks.
- **Strengthening Oversight:** Mandatory registration, unannounced inspections by independent bodies with survivor representation, and publicly accessible audit reports.
- **Empowering Residents:** Ensuring clear, accessible grievance mechanisms, resident committees, and the right to participate in decision-making.
- **Legal Reform:** Enacting and enforcing laws that criminalize institutional abuse, provide for the swift rescue and compensation of survivors, and hold perpetrators-including staff and owners-accountable.
- **Training and Sensitization:** Mandatory gender-sensitive and trauma-informed care training for all institutional staff.

7. Conclusion

The mistreatment of women in closed institutions is a profound betrayal of their mandate. These spaces, intended as refuges, too often become microcosms of the patriarchal oppression they are supposed to counter. This study demonstrates that abuse is facilitated by systemic factors: the carceral approach to social problems, the devaluation of marginalized women's autonomy, and a catastrophic failure of accountability. A genuine commitment to women's safety and dignity requires dismantling the isolated, custodial model and investing in open, rights-affirming, and community-based alternatives that foster agency rather than dependence. The goal must be to support women in leading self-determined lives, free from violence both inside and outside institutional walls.

8. References

1. Bumiller K. In an Abusive State: How Neoliberalism Appropriated the Feminist Movement Against Sexual Violence. Durham (NC): Duke University Press; c2008.
2. Chesney-Lind M. Patriarchy, crime, and justice: feminist criminology in an era of backlash. *Feminist Criminology*. 2006;1(1):6–26.
3. Goffman E. Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates. New York: Anchor Books; c1961.
4. Human Rights Watch. “Years of Hell”: Abuses in India's Women's Shelter Homes [Internet]. New York: Human Rights Watch; c2021. Available from: <https://www.hrw.org>
5. Koyama E. Disloyal to feminism: abuse of survivors within the domestic violence shelter system. In: INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, editor. *The Color of Violence: The INCITE! Anthology*. Cambridge (MA): South End Press; c2006. p. 160–166.
6. Minkowitz T. Abolishing mental health laws to comply with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In: *Rethinking Rights-Based Mental Health Laws*. Oxford: Hart Publishing; c2017. p. 151–178.
7. Rao S. Shelter homes for women: protection or prison? *Economic and Political Weekly*. 2015;50(44):24–27.
8. Sen S, Nair PM. A Report on Trafficking in Women and Children in India 2002–2003. New Delhi: National Human Rights Commission; Institute of Social Sciences; c2004.

Creative Commons (CC) License

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) license. This license permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.