THE CREMATORIUM THAT BURNS FOREVER: SOCIAL REINTEGRATION OF EX-OFFENDERS IN THE CONTEXT OF BANGLADESH

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ABSTRACT

Innately influenced by human will, society has created layer upon layer of rules to refine man. In the reality of postmodern society, those rules and regulations have become stricter and stricter. If anything goes against the law in any way, then the spender has to face punishment according to the prevailing law. But even after the punishment, the pressure of that punishment remains for life. Even if the current society accepts him or her once again, the scar remains eternal. Due to the high prevalence of crime in Bangladesh, every year lots of offenders are punished with imprisonment. After being released from prison, ex-offenders have to face numerous challenges when they return to their family and community that create a barrier to their successful social reintegration. There is a high chance that these ex-offenders will later be involved in recidivism if they cannot reintegrate properly. It will work like a vicious cycle. In Bangladesh, there is limited literature on the challenges that ex-offenders face during their reintegration into society. Against this backdrop, this qualitative study explores and analyzes the existing challenges of reintegration and provides recommendations to overcome such challenges. We believe our study will help to create awareness and develop positive attitudes towards ex-prisoners. This study will provide a guideline to policymakers by upholding the importance of reintegration programs, aftercare services, and necessary assistance for ex-prisoners to lead a law-abiding life and refrain from being recidivists. We believe such a body of knowledge is critical to ongoing efforts to support offenders and society as part of a comprehensive crime prevention and reduction strategy.

KEYWORDS: Punishment, Imprisonment, Reintegration, Recidivism, Ex-offender, Ex-prisoners

INTRODUCTION

Upon release from prison, offenders face a myriad of challenges. After serving their prison sentences, individuals released from incarceration confront a multitude of obstacles (Davis et al., 2012; Seiter & Kadela, 2003; Shinkfield & Graffam, 2009). Many individuals who have been convicted face significant challenges in adapting to society, including issues such as stigmatization and ostracism from family and community, which can adversely affect their ability to secure employment, find housing, or pursue formal education (UNITED NATIONS OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME, 2018). The prison environment differs markedly from mainstream society, and upon release, offenders enter a different and rapidly changing societal environment (Davis et al., 2012). This abrupt transition makes it challenging for them to cope, posing a significant obstacle to their successful reintegration. Thurber (1998) expresses concern that the reintegration of offenders into mainstream society is unsettling for many, as there is resistance to accepting them. This stigma

hampers rehabilitation efforts, ultimately disadvantaging both the offenders and society at large.

Individuals incarcerated in correctional facilities confront a variety of social, economic, and personal challenges that can serve as hindrances to adopting a lifestyle free of criminal activities (Borzycki & Baldry, 2003; Visher, Winterfield & Coggeshall, 2005). These barriers pose obstacles to the rehabilitation process and heighten the likelihood of ex-offenders engaging in further criminal behavior. Policymakers globally are deeply concerned about the social and economic ramifications of unsuccessful offender reintegration. When ex-prisoners fail to reintegrate successfully, there are both direct and indirect costs to the community. If reoffending occurs post-release, it jeopardizes community safety by contributing to an escalation in crime rates (Borzycki & Makkai, 2007). The escalating rates of crime and recidivism in Bangladesh underscore the shortcomings in offender rehabilitation and reintegration. The current challenges lie in issues within penal

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policy, the criminal justice system, and societal acceptance in Bangladesh (Karim, 2010).

The fundamental objectives of criminal justice systems should include the rehabilitation of offenders and their effective social reintegration into society. This viewpoint is explicitly recognized by legally binding international human rights conventions, as well as United Nations standards and norms in crime prevention and criminal justice. These instruments underscore the importance of interventions that facilitate the social reintegration of offenders to prevent further criminal activities and safeguard society (UNODC, 2018). The unsuccessful reentry of prisoners into society incurs significant costs for society, both in financial terms and regarding public safety. The evaluation of the costs of programs supporting offender reintegration must be weighed against the benefits of averting these substantial future social and financial burdens (Griffiths et al., 2007)**.** Without assistance in addressing these challenges, individuals released from incarceration risk becoming ensnared in a detrimental cycle of unsuccessful social integration, reoffending, reconviction, and societal rejection (UNITED NATIONS OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME, 2018). Therefore, the achievement of successful offender reintegration stands as a pivotal element in reducing crime.

The impact of prisoner re-entry has far-reaching consequences. Over the last several years, this issue has received considerable attention worldwide. This issue has become the focal point for many researchers and has not escaped the attention of either policymakers or academics. It has both increased our awareness of the consequences of this phenomenon, as well as guided policymakers in the development of new programs. However, there is little research conducted in the context of Bangladesh, that focuses on the importance of finding out the challenges faced by ex-prisoners upon their release in a society like ours in Bangladesh where ex-prisoners are equally treated as offenders and that creates a barrier to the ex-prisoner's life to reintegrate successfully into society. This further results in high rates of recidivism in our country. This study sought to investigate the challenges facing prisoners as they return to the community after serving their sentences. Additionally, the goal of this research is to provide recommendations to find a sustainable solution for developing new ideas and thoughts that will help the policymakers understand the existing challenges and take necessary steps as a way to prevent recidivism in Bangladesh.

METHODOLOGY

This research used a qualitative methodological approach to understand the status and challenges of offenders' conditions out of punishments and socio-cultural situations in the context of Bangladesh. The authors collect data from primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected from in-depth semi-structured interviews. Besides, secondary sources were books, newspapers, research articles, and journals.

Respondents were selected through snowball sampling as it was challenging to identify and reach ex-prisoners directly. The authors started with a small set of known participants who were ex-prisoners and then gradually expanded by asking those participants to refer others who were convicted and sentenced to imprisonment and return to their society after completing their sentences.

Two case studies were done on this ground to portray exact life conditions. An interview schedule was prepared to ask the respondents some structured, semi-structured, and mostly open-ended questions.

Area of the Study

Any convict from all over Bangladesh could have been a part of this study. Considering the time and paucity, 25 convicted accused have been taken as respondents. To collect data was taken from every single respondent earlier. Moreover, ideas that are related to the study were collected by communicating with them directly. After collecting qualitative data, it was analyzed stepwise. The notes taken from the respondents were narrated in order.

Limitations of the Study

One of the limitations of this study was finding female offenders. They mostly hesitated to answer or avoided answering in most cases. It was difficult to get a large number of participants as this topic was sensitive in the context of Bangladesh. Any future research on this topic will try to consider much more time.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In **Bangladesh,** there is limited literature on offender reintegration and rehabilitation. Similarly, fewer studies have focused on the process of offender reintegration globally (Davis et al., 2012; Healy & O'Donnell, 2008; Steen & Opsal, 2007).

DEFINITION

In its most basic form, "offender reintegration" refers to any initiative or program facilitating a safe return of an offender to the community, promoting their transformation into a law-abiding citizen (Thurber, 1998). Reintegration involves the process of transitioning from incarceration to community life, adapting to the challenges of post-prison existence, and striving to lead a crime-free lifestyle (Laub & Sampson, 2001). Similarly, Maruna (2004) articulates the concept of offender

reintegration as-*"A systematic and evidence-based process by which actions are taken to work with the offender in custody and on release so that communities are better protected from harm and reoffending is significantly reduced. It encompasses the totality of work with prisoners, their families, significant others, and victims in partnership with statutory and voluntary organizations."*

INTERNATIONAL OBLIGATION

The Nelson Mandela Rules, also known as the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, highlight the importance of providing education, vocational training, work, treatment, and various forms of assistance tailored to the individual needs of offenders. This is crucial for supporting the social reintegration of prisoners into society. The United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders, known as the Bangkok Rules, recognize the unique considerations for women prisoners. It acknowledges that some female offenders do not pose a threat to society, and imprisonment can hinder their social reintegration. The Bangkok Rules stress the collaboration of prison authorities with probation, social welfare services, local community groups, and NGOs to develop comprehensive pre- and post-release reintegration programs that address the specific needs of women prisoners. The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for Non-custodial Measures, or the Tokyo Rules, encourage initiatives to raise awareness and foster positive attitudes in the general public regarding the social reintegration of offenders (UNITED NATIONS OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME, 2018).

CHALLENGES OF EX-PRISONERS REINTEGRATION INTO SOCIETY

Upon their release from prison, a majority of ex-prisoners face a multitude of social, economic, and personal challenges that hinder their successful integration into society. These difficulties often stem from the ex-offenders social surroundings, familial ties, peer influences, or inadequate educational and vocational skills (Dandurand et al., 2008)**.** Another study by Griffiths et al. (2007) highlights the hurdles ex-prisoners encounter, including securing suitable housing with limited resources, managing finances with minimal or no savings until they gain lawful income, accessing necessities, and seeking services tailored to their specific needs. Borzycki (2005) suggests that some challenges are rooted in the offender's past experiences, while others directly result from the consequences of incarceration and the challenging reintegration process into the community. Moreover, ex-offenders may grapple with a history of social isolation, marginalization,

physical or emotional abuse, inadequate employment or unemployment, and involvement in a criminal lifestyle from an early age. Many offenders also face the additional challenge of coping with physical and mental disabilities and health issues, often linked to substance abuse and drug addiction (Griffiths et al., 2007).

The reintegration process poses significant difficulties for many offenders, as they confront a range of challenges simultaneously (Maruna et al., 2004; Shinkfield & Graffam, 2009). Firstly, a considerable number struggle to secure employment due to limited education and a lack of job skills (Seiter & Kadela, 2003). Secondly, some grapple with severe social, mental health, and medical issues, often lacking essential family and community support (Petersilia, 2003). Thirdly, upon their release, they must contend with the additional burden of societal stigma associated with having a criminal record (Pager, 2003). Fourthly, the attitudes and skills acquired during incarceration may not be conducive to adapting to life outside prison. Not only do prisons and jails differ significantly from the outside world, but the world they return to may also be markedly different from their pre-incarceration environment (Davis et al., 2012). Richie (2001) asserts that women encounter distinct challenges during re-entry, particularly gender-specific factors such as childcare responsibilities, intimate partner violence, and sexual harassment, which hinder successful reintegration.

Facing challenges in adapting to a new environment is a common issue for individuals transitioning from prison to mainstream society. Scholars such as Davis et al. (2012) and Shinkfield and Graffam (2009) emphasize that prisoners often acquire attitudes and lifestyles in jail that hinder their ability to successfully reintegrate into society upon release. The prison environment significantly differs from mainstream society, and the abrupt shift ex-offenders experience upon release exacerbates this disparity (Davis et al., 2012). Chikadzi's study (2017) reveals that participants expressed the daunting challenge of adjusting to a changed environment, attributing the difficulty to a lack of resources, both material and financial, to cope with the transition. Ex-offenders frequently encounter obstacles such as family acceptance and employment upon release from prison, further complicating their adjustment process (Chikadzi, 2017). Struggling with the change in environment becomes a major hurdle, contributing to the difficulty of adaptation, and the resultant stress and strain often lead to recidivism. Similarly, Shinkfield and Graffam (2009) observe that ex-offenders who face challenges in adapting to post-prison life are at a heightened risk of recidivism. The absence of material, psychological, and social support during this transitional period increases the likelihood of individuals

getting caught in a vicious cycle of release and rearrest (UNODC, 2018).

IDENTIFY CRISIS AND INFERIORITY COMPLEX

The reintegration of offenders frequently involves grappling with an identity crisis, where the label of "criminal" poses challenges to their self-perception, compounded by societal attitudes (Rahman, 2017). Additionally, a prevalent issue faced by many individuals undergoing reintegration is a sense of inferiority, as they often find themselves lagging behind peers due to missed opportunities during their incarceration. This disparity causes considerable stress and regret, creating formidable emotional challenges (Chikadzi, 2017). Scholars, including Davis et al. (2012), Shinkfield and Graffam (2009) highlight that the rapid changes occurring in the external world during an offender's imprisonment can lead to difficulties in adaptation. If left unaddressed, these challenges may impede the reintegration process and contribute to a higher risk of recidivism.

SOCIAL STIGMA, ISOLATION, AND LABELING OF EX-PRISONERS

The initial hurdle faced by all returning prisoners is the stigma of being labeled a "convicted felon" (Chiricos et al., 2007). Numerous studies have demonstrated that the stigmatization of former offenders has detrimental effects on their successful reintegration into society (Moore et al., 2015; Moore et al., 2013; Moran, 2012; Harding, 2003; Tittle et al., 2003). Siddiquee (2018) highlights social stigma as a significant barrier to reintegration for ex-convicts, emphasizing that social isolation is a prevalent experience for them, leading to strained family ties, fractured friendships, and cautious or hostile interactions with community members. This social ostracism exacerbates preexisting mental health issues and can contribute to a cycle of criminal behavior. Bernburg et al. (2006) concluded that the stigmatic labels attached to ex-offenders upon release result in increased involvement in deviant groups, primarily due to exclusion from prosocial groups. They propose that engagement in these deviant peer groups fosters deviant behavior and heightens the risk of recidivism among ex-offenders. Several studies have investigated the gendered experiences of ex-offenders post-release. Brown (2006) suggests that women encounter greater challenges than men when reintegrating into the community. Estrada and Nilsson (2012) found that female offenders face heightened stigmatization because they violate not only the law, but also social norms associated with their gender roles.

MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES, SUBSTANCE USE, AND REENTRY

The reintegration of ex-prisoners face considerable obstacles due to their engagement in substance use, as highlighted by Winterfield and De Castro (2005).

DIFFICULTIES IN MENDING FAMILY AND COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIP

She consequences of imprisonment and the process of reentry have a profound impact on children and families, making it challenging to quantify in many aspects. When a parent is incarcerated, it can disrupt various aspects of family life, such as the family structure, financial responsibilities, emotional support systems, and living arrangements. Imprisonment not only affects spousal and parent-child relationships but also has a potential ripple effect on the broader family networks (Travis et al., 2006). Even when families manage to maintain connections, the presence of an ex-convict can strain relationships, leading to distrust among spouses and instigating fear or rebellious behavior in children, creating complexities in the journey toward normalization. Additionally, the absence of psychological support for families coping with the reintegration of a family member further compounds the challenges (Ahmed, 2020). Recent research suggests that reinforcing the family network and sustaining supportive family connections can positively impact the well-being of both family members and individuals reintegrating into society (Sullivan et al., 2002). Davis et al. (2012) point out that gaining a deeper understanding of the reintegration process enables professionals, families, and communities to better support the adjustment of individuals upon release, ultimately reducing the likelihood of recidivism.

CHALLENGES OF HOUSING AND REENTRY

Obtaining stable housing poses a significant and immediate hurdle for individuals upon their release from prison. The complexities involved in securing housing are compounded by various factors. Studies indicate that ex-prisoners lacking stable living arrangements are at a higher risk of re-incarceration (Metraux & Culhane, 2004). A majority of former inmates recognize the importance of having a secure residence for successful reintegration into society (Visher, 2004).

CHALLENGES OF EMPLOYMENT AND REENTRY

Former inmates encounter significant obstacles in securing and sustaining legitimate employment, including inadequate education, limited work history, and insufficient vocational skills (Harlow, 2003). Many released individuals lack marketable job skills and the literacy needed for gainful employment (Petersilia, 2003). Furthermore, employers' hesitancy to hire ex-prisoners acts as a formidable barrier to job placement (Holzer et al., 2004). Extensive research affirms that

having a criminal record or a history of incarceration substantially diminishes employability, as most employers conduct background checks on potential hires (Brown, 2011; Pager, 2003; Schmitt & Warner, 2011).

Upon reentering the community, former prisoners often face financial challenges, impacting their ability to attend interviews and secure employment, work travel, and obtain necessary clothing or tools (Niven & Olagundoye, 2002). Criminologists have explored the stigma associated with being an ex-prisoner, with some individuals being unable to secure full-time employment due to difficulties obtaining required licenses for certain jobs. Discrimination from employers and coworkers further compounds these challenges. Only a small percentage of former prisoners manage to enter or reenter the workforce, and even fewer attain positions with status and a sufficient salary (Ducksworth, 2010).

Small (2005) argues that unemployment has severe consequences for ex-offenders, leading to stress, low self-esteem, depression, and self-doubt. Consequently, if employment opportunities are denied to prisoners, the repercussions for both individuals and society are devastating. Therefore, it is crucial to provide ex-offenders with employment opportunities to facilitate their reintegration into society and reduce the likelihood of recidivism (Adams, Chen & Chapman, 2016).

INCONSISTANCY AND LACK OF FALLOW -UP

After being released, there is minimal effort to guarantee that the skills and knowledge gained during rehabilitation are adequately applied. The absence of comprehensive post-release support services poses an additional risk to the successful reintegration process (Rahman, 2017).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The life of an ex-prisoner in the context of Bangladesh is a curse. They face lots of struggles and challenges in social reintegration after being released from prison. In our study, we want to explore and understand such challenges in the context of Bangladesh.

The challenges of reintegration of ex-offenders in Bangladesh began from the very early stages, even before their release, during imprisonment. The prison system in Bangladesh faces a lot of challenges in providing rehabilitation programs within the prison. However, rehabilitation programs are vital for the prisoners to successfully reintegrate into their community after getting released. Due to a lack of capacity and resources, our government failed to administer the prison system in Bangladesh in line with international standards.

Besides, overcrowding has worsened the overall situation, and our government fails to provide all the necessary treatment to the prisoners that should comply with the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Offenders, which is considered the standard guideline for the member states, provided by the United Nations. Consequently, these prisoners deprived of the opportunity to be rehabilitated within the prison further fail to cope with society once they return. It is more difficult in the cases of the changed social environment when an ex-prisoner returns to their community after so long.

The prison environment differs significantly from the general public, and individuals released from incarceration face a world vastly different from what they knew before imprisonment (Davis et al., 2012). This transition poses a considerable challenge, as adapting to the distinct culture within prisons makes reintegration into society challenging. Our research revealed that participants encountered formidable obstacles in adjusting to the changing settings, citing the unique prison culture to which they had become accustomed. Many individuals found it difficult to navigate mainstream life after incarceration, leading to heightened tension and stress, potentially increasing the risk of recidivism. The study participants expressed that the transition from prison to mainstream life presented a distinct cultural shift, resulting in psychological stress. Numerous individuals disclosed facing mental health issues during this transition, with studies indicating a significant prevalence of such problems among ex-convicts. Hasan and Rahman (2020) reported that approximately 65% of individuals leaving the penal system in Bangladesh grapple with various mental health problems, ranging from depression and anxiety to more severe conditions like PTSD. Unfortunately, the lack of adequate rehabilitation programs further complicates their ability to cope with these challenges during the reintegration process.

Not limited to that, the social stigma and labeling of ex-prisoners are also evident in our society. they often are deprived of housing, employment, education, health, and social services. Their family members also face different challenges after their return. They are also treated discriminately within society. They also become labeled and stigmatized. A prison returnee suffers from social burnout the most. Participation in social events, social relations, and activities is not as stable as before. Whenever a new problem or incident arises in social life, blame is placed on a particular person without any consideration or judgment.

One significant determining aspect is the unfavorable public opinion of the offenders' reintegration. A study examining the challenges of offender reintegration in

Bangladesh highlights that stigma plays a crucial role in impeding the process. This hindrance is predominantly due to heightened social exclusion and public apprehension about the possibility of reoffending and its impact on public safety (Sakib, 2022).

Due to practicing a punitive philosophy rather than a rehabilitative one, people are still unaware of the offender's rights and are reluctant to provide them with necessary support after they are released from prison. Though an ex-prisoner is already punished by the authorities for his/her previous illegal actions, after the completion of his/ her punishment he shouldn't be treated like an offender and make any discrimination. In reality, these people who have completed their sentences are intentionally excluded from society by labeling them. They are alienated from society and considered a potential threat to public safety and society as a whole. Such social shaming and stigmatization make their life a miserable one. This is more acute in the case of women ex-prisoners.

Cumulative punishment does not end by serving the punishment. Participants complained of social harassment. Society has not accepted them as before or is worried about whether it will in the future. An inmate returning from jail suffers more from his family than himself. The issue becomes more evident in the social context of Bangladesh. Even while the defendant himself is in jail, his family continues to be socially degraded at every moment - which has a huge impact on social events, social gatherings, and family relationships. Each participant in this study directly reported that his family was socially stigmatized because of it. Moreover, they fear that the subject may face such social barriers in the future.

Rebuilding connections with their families and the broader community presents a significant hurdle for individuals with a criminal record. Many of the returnees face the degradation of family and peer relationships. The participants reported that repairing damaged relationships with their families and the community at large is one of their biggest challenges. Participants reported that it was difficult for them to return to a similar conjugal life. Many of the participants said they hardly ever received support from their friends and families rather experienced rejection and were shunned. Participants mentioned that following their incarceration, their family members and community members shunned and excluded them, creating obstacles in their efforts to reintegrate into society post-release. Many former offenders experienced minimal assistance from their families and communities. Rebuilding these connections, reuniting with family, and resuming familial roles and responsibilities upon reentry present distinct and challenging hurdles.

A female respondent shared that, when she returned from prison his husband and in-laws refused to accept her and they didn't even let the respondent stay at their house for a single night. Her children are also forcefully separated from her as she has the label of ex-prisoner. She was also mistreated by her parents, who refused to let her stay with them as they have another daughter who will get married soon. So, they did not want to take the risk. Now she is suffering from a financial crisis and got involved in fraud to earn money and for livelihood.

Participants in this study experienced various forms of social isolation. A type of social sanction is imposed on every family. The victim and his family members face obstacles in forming new social relationships. Other parts of society form a kind of taboo resistance circle centered around the victim's family. This study shows that a convicted defendant's sentence never ends. It continues time after time, time after time till the end of life. One of the key respondents said that his fourteen-year-old boy is a victim of bullying both in the community and in his school. His friends and also the community members used to bully him by calling him the "son of a thief", and used to say, "Son of a thief will also be a thief". His son stopped going to school and they changed his school. Another respondent said that, though he returned from jail people still mock his daughter as a "daughter of a criminal" and consequently it becomes difficult for them to arrange marriage for his daughter. And because of the situation they become bound to leave their home and shift into a new city. So that no one can question his past life. But when they come to a new city they face a financial crisis, as they had an established business in their hometown.

As per findings by Hossain and Ahmed (2018), a significant majority, exceeding 70%, of property owners in urban regions of Bangladesh decline rental opportunities for individuals with prior criminal records. Consequently, this rejection leads to homelessness or precarious living conditions for ex-offenders. Legislation mandating background checks not only worsens the issue of homelessness but also reinforces bias against those who have been previously incarcerated. The limited availability of government-subsidized housing or shelters for this demographic further intensifies instability, posing challenges for them to disassociate from criminal associations (Rahman, 2017).

Changes in social life are accompanied by changes in livelihood due to return to prison. In our study, we found that, despite having the requisite skills and qualifications, the majority of participants encountered unemployment. Many employers hesitate to employ individuals with a criminal

record, particularly those who haven't demonstrated their capabilities post-release and face societal bias linked to imprisonment. Furthermore, only a limited number of former offenders possess the specific skills, expertise, or experience sought by employers. A respondent said though he has enough qualifications, he was not able to find any job so that he could support his family and lead a normal life and it happened only because of his previous criminal history. In the Bangladeshi job market, those who have been penalized for any reason face a disadvantage in the final check. It should be noted that if a person is serving a sentence of more than two years in a criminal case, he/she loses his job. During the trial, he/she was deprived of various benefits such as close to half of his basic salary as maintenance expenses. If any kind of case is pending against a job candidate, she/he cannot join the government service until the case is settled.

The concept that possessing a criminal record or undergoing imprisonment significantly diminishes one's chances of securing employment is strongly supported by a substantial body of data. This is due to the widespread practice among most companies of conducting background checks on potential hires (Brown, 2011; Pager, 2003; Schmitt & Warner, 2011). A survey conducted by Karim (2019) revealed that a staggering eighty percent of companies exhibit hesitancy in hiring individuals with a history of criminal activities. Even for those who acquire vocational skills while incarcerated, the persistence of discrimination remains, particularly in industries highly valuing technological advancements (Islam, 2021). Exacerbating the situation is the absence of legislative safeguards against employment discrimination and the presence of laws mandating the disclosure of criminal histories during job applications, both of which curtail the economic opportunities available to ex-convicts. Although the gig economy may offer some relief, it also exposes formerly incarcerated individuals to exploitative practices, precarious income, and hazardous working conditions (Ahmed, 2019).

A significant number of participants reported that their work chances are negatively impacted by a criminal conviction history and serving a term in prison. Some participants reported that they had to change previous jobs, new employment, or work environment/location. Participants in this study reported that they faced denigration at work, barriers to entry to work, harassment at work, etc. due to their return from prison.

Some of our participants claimed that there was little opportunity to get financial help from any financial institution because of the same reason and so they became unable to start a new business. No one trusted them so they decided to earn money by illegal means including gambling, selling drugs and illegal goods, theft, fraud, snitching, etc. The participant testimonies make it clear that obtaining work following a prison sentence is a significant obstacle in our country that hampers the successful reintegration of ex-inmates into their society.

As many of the ex-prisoners fail to reintegrate properly, they choose to leave the conventional life and become involved in crime again which refers to recidivism. Social stigma and labeling play an influential role in making the offender start a criminal career rather than lead a law-abiding life. So in our study, we found many respondents who claim that, as society does not receive them normally but rather judges them based on their previous criminal history, the ex-offenders are again involved in crime due to the same reasons including poverty, unemployment, etc. or for the new reasons including discriminatory behavior of community members. In many ways when ex-offenders are rejected from their family, friends, and community, It is quite probable that they will communicate with other criminals where they get mental support and again have high chances of recidivism. In the absence of society or family acceptability, formerly criminals may become impoverished, while some may find acceptance with other criminals and become recurrent offenders. If the criminal does not receive the necessary support and guidance from their family and the community to help them adjust to life outside of jail, it is likely that they will find it too difficult to lead a life free of crime and that they will commit new crimes. So, it works like a vicious cycle that starts with the challenges of social reintegration and results in recidivism.
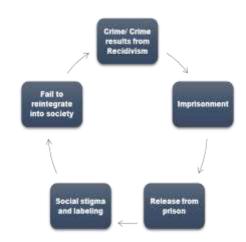

Figure: Vicious Cycle of Reintegration & Recidivism

Shinkfield and Graffam (2009) note that individuals who struggle to adapt to life outside of prison face a considerable likelihood of returning to criminal behavior. Recidivism is often linked to peer pressure and influence

(Zondi, 2012). For female ex-offenders, rebuilding and maintaining relationships with their children post-release pose significant challenges, leading to emotional distress and stigmatization. This difficulty in fulfilling their maternal role can contribute to repeated criminal conduct and a return to correctional supervision (Richie, 2001). However, research suggests that offering employment opportunities to ex-offenders can facilitate their reintegration into society and reduce the risk of recidivism (Adams, Chen & Chapman, 2017). Consequently, the reintegration of offenders into society holds crucial importance within Bangladesh's criminal justice system, especially considering the persistently high recidivism rate, which hovers around 60% (Chowdhury, 2018).

After-care services are crucial for the successful reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals into society. These services play a vital role in helping them adjust to life outside prison and address transition-related challenges. Key components of after-care services include providing food, counseling, short-term housing, and ensuring basic needs are met, as highlighted by Altschuler and Armstrong (2001). Failing to offer such assistance may contribute to an increase in recidivism rates. Muntingh (2005) emphasizes the importance of support for ex-offenders in five key areas post-release: finding employment, securing financial assistance, obtaining housing, developing coping mechanisms, and receiving support from family and friends. Effective after-care programs are therefore essential for the successful reintegration of offenders into society.

There are hardly any reintegration programs and aftercare services for the ex-offenders in Bangladesh. In such cases, their normal social life was destroyed. Some of our respondents said that they would rather lead a better life within the prison where no one was to judge them. They were not alienated within the prison and there were no chances of stigmatization at all. Some of them believe they create a burden on their family whenever they are released from prison, so they think them prison is the right place to live for the rest of their life. From their assertion, we can relate to how miserable an ex-prisoner life is when they return to society after completing their imprisonment.

CONCLUSION

There is a high prevalence of crimes in Bangladesh and with time, new types of crime are emerging. Our prison system faces challenges in implementing the Prison Act, of 1894, though it is a colonial act. It is high time that this law should also be amended following the international standard and prioritizing the rights of prisoners. Besides, due to a lack of capacity and resources, our government failed to administer the prison system in Bangladesh in line with global standards. However, due to overcrowding, our government fails to provide all the necessary treatment to the prisoners that should comply with the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Offenders, which is considered the standard guideline for the member states, provided by the United Nations. Besides that, after being released from prison, offenders have to face many challenges in social reintegration due to the lack of opportunity to access rehabilitation programs both inside and outside the prison. Not limited to that, ex-prison inmates face many challenges as they attempt to transition from the institution to the community. The social stigma and labeling the ex-prisoners are also evident in our society creating a barrier to their successful social reintegration. We still believe in a punitive philosophy rather than a rehabilitative one and mostly focus on victims. Still, we are unaware of the offenders and the ex-offender's rights. We even forget that whenever a person is released from prison, he is already punished by the authorities for his/her previous illegal actions. There is a high chance that these ex-offenders will later be involved in recidivism if they cannot reintegrate properly within society. It is hence identical to a vicious cycle. Besides, in Bangladesh, the correction system only focuses on rehabilitation within the prison but neglects the importance of rehabilitation and reintegration programs outside the prison after released from it by considering the challenges an ex-inmate faces after getting released from prison and to some extent making them choice a criminal path again in our country. Effectively reintegrating individuals into the community is a crucial subject of study aimed at minimizing harm to both society and those undergoing incarceration. Therefore, this paper has explored the diverse obstacles confronted by former offenders as they strive to reintegrate into the broader community.

RECOMMENDATION

The government of Bangladesh should reform our penal policy and give importance to non-custodial sentences including probation, diversion, community services, restitution, house arrest, and other alternative methods of sentencing including boot camps, electronic monitoring, etc. These methods should get attention as an alternative to incarceration by considering the negative impact of custodial sentences especially in the cases of juvenile delinquents, 1st time offenders, female offenders, and in the cases of minor offences. Restorative justice including Victim-Offender Mediation, Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR), Family Group Conferencing, Community Conferencing, Circle Sentencing, etc., and community-based treatment programs can effectively solve the problem and challenges of ex-prisoners reintegration within society after getting punished.

Considering the context of Bangladesh, punishment of criminals whether long term or short term has a long-lasting effect. Due to the existence of social stigma associated with ex-prisoners, our society imposes a kind of isolation on criminals even after serving their sentences. Social stability will come if society is more flexible, especially for those who have committed less serious crimes, who are juveniles, and for the first-time offenders. This will increase their chances of getting employment and improve their socio-economic status. This will make it easier for ex-offenders to adjust to life after incarceration.

Offender rehabilitation programs within and outside the prison play a crucial role in preparing ex-offenders for social reintegration. Hence, these programs should focus on skill development, education, and psychological support to address the underlying issues contributing to criminal behavior and also help to cope with reintegration challenges. By providing tools for personal growth and addressing rehabilitation needs, these programs should aim to enhance the chances of successful reintegration into society upon release and reduce the rates of recidivism. All concerned institutions, including the Government of Bangladesh, should provide comprehensive post-prison support services for ex-offenders. These services should be contemporary, sustainable, and individualized treatment-based.

Social awareness about crime is very important and at the same time, awareness about the social reintegration and rehabilitation of criminals is essential. General people should be educated about the negative impacts of retributive penal philosophy and unsuccessful reintegration that hampers public safety. Public can contribute to the successful social reintegration of ex-prisoners to lead a normal life after coming back to their community from prison. Our government institutions, social institutions including educational and religious institutions, non-governmental organizations, community police, civil society, and importantly media can play effective roles in increasing awareness regarding the importance of social reintegration of ex-offenders.

It is possible to achieve great success by implementing curricula that accurately enlighten students about the criminal justice system, recidivism, and the difficulties associated with reintegration. These educational initiatives, which start in high school, can foster the development of a future generation that is more empathetic and caring (Halsey and Deegan, 2017).

Campaigning via social media can play a vital role. The widespread use of social media has enabled online activism, which has become a powerful force for good in society. Using hashtag campaigns, viral stories, and interactive platforms, many people can be engaged in conversations about eliminating stigmas (Maruna and LeBel, 2012). Public forums and community dialogue should be established in order to promote open communication between residents of the community, law enforcement, and even ex-offenders. At these kinds of events, myths can be disproved, and people can voice their complaints or misunderstandings without worrying about reprisals (Clear and Sumter, 2002). Influential personalities, such as celebrities and influencers, can use their platform to promote de-stigmatization. Their support can extend to a wide range of demographics and could even entail partnerships with well-established groups pursuing similar objectives (Brayne, 2014).

Ensure that more resources are channeled to Departments of Correctional Services and non-governmental organizations offering similar services aimed at reintegration. The range of services should be made more holistic and self-contained. Community service should be explored as an alternative sentencing strategy for minor crimes. This will ensure that petty criminals are not exposed to hardened criminals in prison as such exposure may lead them to more serious crimes.

To improve the social condition of the ex-offenders, social acceptance, and economic development should be done in post-prison life. To ensure that, ex-offenders are not treated discriminately, the government and other concerned organizations and bodies should come forward and work to reduce the challenges of housing, getting social and economic services like bank loans, starting, or completing education, rejoining or starting new employment, initially face by the ex-prisoners. They should continue monitoring for certain periods so that community members including house owners, service providers, employers, and bank authorities can get relief from the fear of crime and can also build trust in these ex-prisoners without hesitating to compromise their security.

Financial institutions can provide ex-offenders with small loans, so that, they can start a new business on their own without depending on others. A criminal suffers financially during the trial process and the sentence he and his family receive. In some cases, they get stuck in the cycle of debt that creates a new burden for ex-offenders after getting released from prison. After suffering the punishment, the ultimate challenge for them is to overcome this mental disorder. Appropriate measures can be taken by the government and concerned partners in this case.

Public awareness campaigns can also be used to promote legislation that facilitates the reintegration of ex-offenders into society. Legislative change may result from these

campaigns' ability to increase public support for measures like "Ban the Box." To provide ex-offenders an opportunity to discuss their past during interviews, the "Ban the Box" campaign aims to remove the question concerning criminal background from employment applications (D'Alessio et al., 2015).

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