



Women behind bars: Lived experiences of female persons deprived of liberty during pandemic

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Abstract

The pandemic significantly impacted all aspects of human life, including the experiences of female persons deprived of liberty (PDLs) in correctional institutions. Understanding their lived experiences is crucial in developing programs that promote holistic reformation and help them reintegrate as law-abiding citizens upon returning to their communities. This study explored the experiences of female PDLs during the pandemic, focusing on the problems they encountered inside the rehabilitation facility and their coping mechanisms. A qualitative research method was employed, involving eight female PDLs from the Metro Bacolod District Jail–Female Dormitory. Colaizzi’s method of data analysis was used to interpret the findings, resulting in six emergent themes: resiliency and resourcefulness behind challenges, realizations over difficulties, behavioral adjustments as a key to survival, positive reinforcement for change and growth, well-balanced physical and mental health, and faith and optimism. The problems encountered mainly related to basic human needs, prompting the development of behaviors such as resilience, patience, and optimism to adapt and survive within the facility. The study also found that the informants experienced growth in their physical, mental, and spiritual well-being despite the challenges. It is recommended that jail administrators continue implementing restorative programs and enhance their consideration of the basic human needs of female PDLs to ensure the continued effectiveness of rehabilitation efforts.

Keywords: *adjustments, challenges, coping mechanisms, human needs, female inmates*

Article History:

Received: August 28, 2025

Accepted: November 30, 2025

Revised: November 15, 2025

Published online: December 15, 2025

Suggested Citation:

Barican, L.J.B., Caballero, N.S. & Bitar, J.T. (2025). Women behind bars: Lived experiences of female persons deprived of liberty during pandemic. *The Research Probe*, 5(2), 37-55. <https://doi.org/10.53378/trp.193>

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented disruptions to global society, deeply affecting institutions such as healthcare, education, justice, and corrections. Correctional facilities emerged as among the most vulnerable due to their structural and operational limitations, including overcrowding, inadequate sanitation, poor access to healthcare, and limited resources. These conditions heightened the risk of infection, particularly for persons deprived of liberty (PDLs), who had little or no capacity to practice preventive measures such as social distancing and regular hand hygiene (Hawks et al., 2020). Beyond the universal vulnerabilities shared by incarcerated populations, women in prisons face unique health, social, and psychological challenges that are often neglected in systems primarily designed for men. This neglect became more pronounced during the pandemic, when restrictions such as visitation bans and program suspensions exacerbated isolation and limited access to gender-sensitive healthcare. Globally, women account for about 7% of the prison population, yet their incarceration rates are rising faster than men's, underscoring the need to examine their experiences more closely (Heimer et al., 2023).

In the Philippines, the vulnerabilities of female PDLs intersect with systemic issues of congestion and underfunding. As of 2022, the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP) reported an alarming congestion rate across detention facilities nationwide (Kahano-Kahano-Alpino, 2024). Although women constitute only 6.4% of the total PDL population (UNODC, 2024), they represent a sector with distinct needs. The majority of incarcerated women are also mothers or caregivers (Rajagopal et al., 2023), meaning imprisonment disrupts not only their lives but also the well-being of their children and families. Moreover, women in detention often face compounded struggles such as limited access to menstrual hygiene products, prenatal and maternal care, and psychosocial support, which are not systematically addressed by current carceral policies (Agbaria et al., 2025). During the pandemic, suspension of visitation and social support networks intensified their isolation, leaving women with reduced external support for both material and emotional needs (Bristol et al., 2021). These conditions highlight that while both male and female PDLs faced adversity during COVID-19, women bore a disproportionate burden due to gendered vulnerabilities.

Despite these realities, there remains a notable gap in both global and Philippine scholarship regarding the lived experiences of female inmates during crisis conditions such as the pandemic. International research has documented the broad challenges of incarceration

during COVID-19, including infection management, mental health impacts, and restrictions on movement and contact (Coyle et al., 2021; Bright et al., 2022; Bright et al., 2023; Bright et al., 2024). However, much of this scholarship tends to generalize findings from male-dominated prison systems, leaving women's experiences underexplored. For instance, reproductive and maternal health, mental health burdens such as trauma and depression, and the social consequences of disrupted caregiving roles are often overlooked (Augsburger et al., 2022). In the Philippine context, existing literature has focused largely on jail congestion, physical health conditions, or food scarcity (Alipoyo, 2022; Nario-Lopez, 2021; Arambulo et al., 2021; Villafuerte et al., 2023). While these studies shed light on systemic deficiencies, they fail to capture the nuanced, gender-specific challenges female PDLs encountered during the pandemic. Thus, there is limited understanding of how women navigate incarceration under overlapping crises of public health emergency and institutional neglect.

This study addresses that research gap by focusing specifically on the lived experiences of female PDLs in the Metro Bacolod District Jail–Female Dormitory during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, it explores two guiding questions: (1) What challenges did female PDLs face during the pandemic? and (2) What coping mechanisms did they employ to survive these conditions? By centering the narratives of women themselves, this research not only surfaces the struggles related to basic human needs, healthcare access, and psychosocial well-being but also highlights their strategies of resilience, adaptation, and survival. The expected outcomes include the documentation of gender-specific challenges, insights into coping strategies shaped by cultural and institutional contexts, and practical recommendations for correctional reform. These findings contribute to filling the gap in both global and Philippine literature, while also supporting the development of gender-sensitive and humane policies in correctional management.

Ultimately, the significance of this study extends beyond the immediate context of the pandemic. The insights drawn from the lived experiences of female PDLs can inform long-term correctional reforms that recognize and address the unique needs of women in detention. By integrating gender-sensitive approaches into carceral policy and practice, correctional systems can move closer to rehabilitation that is not only lawful but also humane and responsive. In the Philippine setting, where overcrowding and systemic neglect have long been normalized, this research provides empirical grounding for reforms that ensure women

are not marginalized further in times of crisis. In the broader international discourse, it contributes to shifting attention toward the intersection of gender, incarceration, and public health emergencies, ensuring that women's voices and experiences are not left invisible in scholarship and policymaking.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on General Strain Theory (GST), Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Feminist Criminology/Gendered Pathways Perspective, Coping Theory, and Resilience Theory. Together, these frameworks provide a multi-dimensional explanation of how female PDLs navigated incarceration during the COVID-19 pandemic, considering not only the structural and psychological strains they endured but also the gender-specific, coping, and resilience dynamics that shaped their lived experiences.

General Strain Theory (GST) offers a valuable lens for understanding the emotional and behavioral consequences of deprivation (Jang & Agnew, 2015). GST posits that individuals exposed to negative stimuli such as institutional neglect, trauma, or unmet needs experience emotions like anger, frustration, and despair, which may result in maladaptive behaviors or, conversely, in protective coping strategies (Brezina & Baumann, 2020; Meldrum et al., 2022). Applied to incarcerated women, GST highlights how strains generated by overcrowding, suspended family visits, and lack of healthcare during the pandemic triggered feelings of depression, anxiety, and self-blame. At the same time, female PDLs adopted adaptive responses such as religious faith, mutual support, and behavioral adjustments to manage adversity (Bright et al., 2022), behaviors consistent with GST's recognition of both negative and positive responses to strain.

Complementing GST, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (McLeod, 2023) explains how unmet physiological and safety needs shaped the behaviors of incarcerated women during the pandemic. Overcrowding in Philippine jails disrupted access to food, water, sanitation, and medical care. Female inmates also reported gender-specific unmet needs such as menstrual hygiene products and maternal healthcare (Gharagozloo et al., 2025). According to Maslow, when basic needs are unmet, individuals focus primarily on survival, as observed in the resourcefulness of PDLs who improvised coping systems like food-sharing and recycling scarce resources. Despite these constraints, many sought to fulfill higher-order needs by engaging in religious devotion, maintaining peer support, and striving for self-esteem and

growth within the carceral setting. Maslow's framework thus contextualizes how deprivation influences survival behaviors while also illuminating inmates' aspirations for dignity, belonging, and personal development.

Building on these perspectives, Feminist Criminology and the Gendered Pathways Perspective highlight the importance of analyzing women's incarceration through a gendered lens (Wilfong & Plaza, 2021). Research shows that women often enter the criminal justice system through pathways shaped by poverty, victimization, caregiving roles, and gender-based inequalities (Belknap, 2020; Chesney-Lind & Morash, 2013). Unlike men, female PDLs frequently face compounded vulnerabilities, including histories of abuse, mental health issues, and familial responsibilities, which make their prison experiences qualitatively different. The pandemic exacerbated these challenges by severing women's family ties, particularly with children, and magnifying the neglect of gender-sensitive correctional programs. This perspective is crucial for the current study because it positions female PDLs not simply as offenders but as women navigating the intersection of systemic inequality, trauma, and incarceration under crisis conditions. It underscores the need to analyze their lived experiences beyond a gender-neutral lens and to develop correctional policies that reflect women's unique realities.

Another relevant framework is the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and applied extensively in correctional psychology. This model views coping as a dynamic process in which individuals appraise stressful situations and select strategies to manage them (Biggs et al., 2017; Regehr & Bober, 2005). In the case of female PDLs, the pandemic introduced multiple stressors: risk of infection, overcrowded living conditions, and loss of family contact. Their coping responses, ranging from cognitive reappraisal (acceptance, optimism, faith) to problem-focused strategies (resource sharing, compliance with rules) align with this framework. Recent research emphasizes that coping styles significantly influence mental health outcomes in incarcerated populations, with adaptive coping linked to resilience and maladaptive coping associated with heightened distress (Kusumastuti et al., 2025; Megari & Argyriadou, 2025; Owusu Ansah et al., 2025). This theory provides a structure for interpreting the coping mechanisms observed in the study, showing how women actively managed stress despite constrained agency.

Finally, Resilience Theory offers a positive framework for understanding how individuals adapt and thrive despite adversity. Resilience is conceptualized as the capacity to

maintain or regain psychological well-being in the face of significant challenges (Masten, 2021). Studies on incarcerated women demonstrate that resilience can emerge through spirituality, social support, and personal growth, even under punitive and restrictive environments (Crewe, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, female PDLs displayed resilience by fostering solidarity, sustaining religious devotion, and reframing their hardships as opportunities for personal change (Augsburger et al., 2022). This framework is particularly relevant to the Philippine context, where overcrowded and underfunded prisons amplify vulnerabilities but also cultivate adaptive behaviors rooted in cultural values of faith, family, and collectivism.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of female PDLs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Phenomenology emphasizes uncovering the meaning of human experiences as perceived by individuals themselves. This design was deemed appropriate because the phenomenon under study, incarceration under pandemic conditions required access to participants' personal narratives and subjective interpretations rather than numerical measurement.

To ensure rigor, researchers engaged in bracketing and reflexivity to minimize biases and preconceptions that could influence interpretation. Bracketing involves consciously suspending assumptions about incarceration and gendered experiences, while reflexivity requires researchers to document their own perspectives and potential influences throughout the research process (Squires, 2023). This practice ensured that findings remained grounded in participants' voices rather than researcher expectations.

3.2. Participants of the Study

The participants consisted of eight (8) female PDLs detained at the Metro Bacolod District Jail–Female Dormitory. They were selected through purposive sampling, which is widely used in qualitative studies to identify participants who can provide rich, firsthand accounts of the phenomenon (Palinkas et al., 2015). Eligibility criteria included: (a) being female, (b) incarcerated during the COVID-19 pandemic, and (c) willingness to voluntarily

share experiences. Those unable to participate due to medical or psychological conditions were excluded for ethical considerations.

The sample size was sufficient to achieve data saturation, which refers to the point at which no new themes or insights emerge from the data. Recent reviews suggest that in relatively homogeneous populations, phenomenological studies typically reach meaning saturation with 6 to 9 participants (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). In this study, saturation was confirmed after the eighth participant, when no additional themes emerged from subsequent interviews and discussions. This sample size balanced feasibility with the need for depth, allowing researchers to capture diverse yet overlapping experiences of female incarceration during the pandemic.

3.3. Instrumentation and Data Gathering Process

The primary data-gathering tool was a semi-structured interview guide consisting of open-ended questions about participants' experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms during the pandemic. The guide was developed by the researchers based on a review of literature and validated by experts in criminology, psychology, and jail management. Expert review is a commonly used method of ensuring content validity in qualitative research tools, ensuring questions are clear, relevant, and aligned with study objectives (Elangovan & Sundaravel, 2021).

Data collection involved in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussion (FGD) with five participants. This dual approach allowed for both individual depth and collective insight: IDIs provided space for personal, sensitive narratives, while the FGD revealed shared struggles and collective coping strategies. The use of semi-structured interviews and FGDs is widely recommended in qualitative management and social science research because it allows flexibility while still maintaining focus on the research aims.

All interviews and discussions were conducted inside the facility with approval from the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP). Strict adherence to COVID-19 protocols including mask-wearing, social distancing, and sanitation was observed, consistent with BJMP guidelines during the pandemic (Philippine News Agency, 2020). With participants' consent, all sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. Field notes were also kept to record non-verbal cues and contextual observations, enriching the dataset.

3.4. Data Analysis

The transcribed data were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological method, which remains one of the most widely applied approaches in descriptive phenomenology. The process involved seven systematic steps: (1) familiarization with transcripts, (2) extraction of significant statements, (3) formulation of meanings, (4) clustering of related themes, (5) developing an exhaustive description, (6) distilling the essence of the phenomenon, and (7) validating themes with participants through member checking.

Trustworthiness was ensured through established qualitative criteria. Credibility was achieved via member checking, where participants reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of the themes (Schafer & Phillippi, 2025). Dependability and confirmability were supported by maintaining an audit trail of analytic decisions and using reflexive journals to track researcher perspectives (Shamseer et al., 2025). Transferability was addressed through thick description of the research context, participant demographics, and jail conditions, enabling readers to assess applicability to other correctional settings (Noble & Heale, 2019).

3.5. Research Ethics

The study complied with the ethical standards of STI West Negros University and the Philippine National Ethical Guidelines for Health and Health-Related Research (PHREB, 2022), which outline additional protections for vulnerable populations such as incarcerated persons. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after they were fully briefed about the study's objectives, procedures, risks, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained. Participants were assigned codes (e.g., PDL1, PDL2) in transcripts and reports, and no identifying details were included in any dissemination of results. Data including audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely with access limited to the research team and were permanently deleted after the study.

Special consideration was given to health and safety protocols due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Data collection complied with BJMP's protective measures (mask use, distancing, sanitation), thereby minimizing risks to both participants and researchers. These practices reflected not only procedural ethics but also relational ethics, emphasizing respect, empathy, and the building of trust between researchers and participants.

4. Findings and Discussion

The narratives gathered through FGDs and IDIs with female PDLs during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed experiences of survival, adaptation, and reflection within a constrained environment. From an initial pool of 30 significant statements, researchers extracted 20 formulated meanings, which were clustered into 11 thematic groups and consolidated into six emergent themes. These themes encapsulate both the hardships endured and the coping strategies employed by female PDLs, offering critical insight into the gendered realities of incarceration under crisis conditions.

Theme 1: Resiliency and Resourcefulness Amid Challenges

Female PDLs consistently emphasized resilience and resourcefulness in coping with chronic shortages of food, water, and other essentials during the pandemic. Many relied on “salo” (collective food sharing), water rationing, and creative budgeting to survive the harsh conditions. One participant explained:

“When COVID started, they had a hard time due to water shortages... So, if you don't have a budget, that will be a real problem.” (FGD 1)

Another described how scarcity was alleviated through mutual support:

“We were being given a raw fish by our visitor. We do share our food... so that we can taste different dishes.” (IDI 1, L: 7-8).

These narratives demonstrate both individual and collective resilience, where survival depended not only on personal adaptability but also on solidarity among inmates. Recent research supports this finding: resilience has been shown to foster adaptation and subjective well-being under adversity (Mahdiani & Ungar, 2021), while Marmolejo et al. (2020) documented similar collective coping mechanisms in Latin American prisons during COVID-19. Ifeonu et al. (2023) further highlighted that incarcerated populations often draw on shared survival practices, such as communal food management, to overcome deprivation. However, resilience has its limits. Aon et al. (2025) argue that when structural neglect is extreme such as overcrowding, poor sanitation, and insufficient medical care resilience cannot fully protect inmates from harm. Institutional failures often magnify vulnerabilities regardless of individual coping. Thus, while the resourcefulness of female PDLs demonstrates strength, it also

underscores the urgent need for systemic reforms to address chronic shortages and improve jail conditions.

Theme 2: Realizations Over Difficulties

The hardships of confinement often prompted participants to reflect deeply on their past actions, leading to realizations about accountability, family responsibility, and the need for personal change. One participant remarked:

“I often think about my children and family outside. However, I can’t do anything against it anymore because it’s already there. I just think these are already the consequences of my actions and wrongdoings.” (IDI 3)

Others highlighted how the challenges of prison life shaped their desire for reform:

“Here, I realized the mistakes I did before, and it made me think of changing my ways when I return to my family.” (FGD 2)

These reflections are consistent with studies highlighting the role of reflection in rehabilitation and post-traumatic growth. Forsyth et al. (2025) found that structured opportunities for reflection supported resilience among incarcerated populations, while Rosenfeld and Grigg (2022) linked self-awareness during confinement to reduced risks of recidivism. Similarly, Stone et al. (2025) argued that realizations under confinement can strengthen an inmate’s motivation to pursue reform upon release. However, reflection is not always beneficial. Stoll (2022) noted that when inmates are left unsupported, forced reflection can result in heightened guilt, shame, and despair rather than growth. Some participants in this study described such emotional burdens, particularly when thinking of children left outside. These insights suggest that while self-reflection is valuable, it must be supported with psychosocial counseling to ensure it fosters positive outcomes.

Theme 3: Behavioral Adjustments as a Key for Survival

Participants described how daily survival depended on behavioral adjustments such as patience, tolerance, and cooperation to reduce interpersonal conflict in an overcrowded facility. One participant explained:

“It’s so tiring to deal with some people here since everyone has their own character. What we do here is to understand each other since you cannot please everyone.” (IDI 1)

Another added:

“You need to adjust yourself every day. Some are hot-tempered, some are quiet. If you fight, life here will be harder, so I just adjust.” (FGD 1)

This adaptation reflects the importance of emotional regulation and social negotiation in maintaining peace. Wang et al. (2025) found that behavioral adaptability fosters stronger social support systems in restrictive settings. The experiences of female PDLs in this study confirm both perspectives: adjustment promoted harmony but was also mentally exhausting, pointing to the need for structured conflict-resolution and peer-support programs.

Theme 4: Positive Reinforcement for Change and Growth

Respectful and supportive treatment from correctional staff emerged as a powerful motivator for rehabilitation. One participant shared:

“They are able to treat us so well, discipline us, and secure us as someone who is their family.” (IDI 2)

Another emphasized:

“When we are treated with respect, we feel like human beings again, not just prisoners.” (FGD 2)

These experiences show how positive reinforcement can restore dignity and encourage personal growth. Maruna et al. (2020) highlighted positive reinforcement as central to desistance, while Wang et al. (2025) found that supportive correctional staff influence inmates’ willingness to engage in rehabilitation. For this reason, the findings highlight the importance of institutionalizing respect-based management, ensuring that positive treatment is systemic and consistent across facilities.

Theme 5: Well-Balanced Physical and Mental Health

Participants underscored the significance of health-related activities such as exercise, seminars, and educational resources in maintaining both physical and psychological well-being. One participant recalled:

“Before entering the cell, I was so thin because I was a user. However, when I entered here, I gained weight. In here, I can eat enough and take good care of myself through exercising compared to when I was outside, I cannot even look after myself at all.” (IDI 1)

Another highlighted the mental health benefits of programs:

“The seminars and counseling helped me think positively and avoid depression.” (FGD 3)

Such experiences demonstrate the critical role of wellness in rehabilitation. Megari and Argyriadou (2025) confirmed that structured health programs improve inmates’ mood, resilience, and cognitive functioning. The UNODC (2024) also stressed the integration of healthcare in detention settings as an essential human rights obligation. Yet, access to health services is often inconsistent. Kahano-Alpino (2024) and Augsburg et al. (2022) found that structural inequities such as overcrowding, resource shortages, and uneven implementation of programs limit the effectiveness of wellness interventions. These findings highlight the need for institutional reforms to ensure that all PDLs have equal access to health and mental health programs.

Theme 6: Faith and Optimism as Coping Mechanisms

Faith and spirituality emerged as central to participants’ coping. Many described daily prayer, Bible study, and trust in God as vital sources of comfort and strength:

“At first, it is so difficult for you to adjust, especially when you used to have your family with you every single day. However, I thought to myself that there’s nothing I can do. Because once you accept everything about yourself, you will just become light-minded later on.” (IDI 3, L: 14-17)

“Back then, I was really a warrior when it comes to things because I was so strict about everything. This time, I learned that it’s up to you, Lord... Everything seems to be a big worry, but here, I think my coping mechanism is my time with the Lord.” (FGD 1, L: 24)

“I overcome everything because I kept my faith in God. He always listens to me when I have no one to talk to and He gave me strength when I was at my weakest.” (IDI 1, L: 23-27)

These accounts highlight how spirituality not only offered emotional stability but also instilled optimism for the future. Garro (2025) and Pambayun et al. (2023) found that faith-based coping was particularly effective among female inmates during the pandemic. Reliance on spirituality raises important considerations. Participants in this study clearly viewed spirituality as an empowering force that sustained them through hardship.

The six themes show that female PDLs navigated incarceration during the pandemic through practical resilience, reflective awareness, behavioral adaptation, positive reinforcement, health practices, and spiritual reliance. Significant statements illustrate their lived realities, grounding the analysis in authentic voices. Supporting studies affirm the centrality of resilience, adaptability, health, and spirituality in coping, while contradictory studies highlight the limits of individual strategies when institutional neglect, overcrowding, or inconsistent programs persist.

5. Conclusion

This study found that female persons deprived of liberty (PDLs) at the Metro Bacolod District Jail–Female Dormitory demonstrated remarkable resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic despite severe constraints brought by overcrowding, scarcity, and social isolation. Through collective and individual coping strategies, such as resource sharing, behavioral adjustments, self-reflection, and spiritual reliance, women were able to preserve dignity, emotional stability, and a sense of hope. The emergent themes highlight that resilience was not merely a personal trait but a shared, socially grounded process that enabled survival and adaptation amid prolonged uncertainty and deprivation.

The findings underscore that effective coping among female PDLs is deeply influenced by the institutional environment. Positive reinforcement from correctional staff, access to health and wellness activities, psychosocial support, and opportunities for faith-based practices significantly strengthened inmates' capacity for growth and rehabilitation. While the women displayed strong agency, the study emphasizes that sustainable resilience requires consistent, humane, and gender-responsive correctional policies. Strengthening supportive structures within detention facilities is essential not only for crisis response but also for fostering long-term rehabilitation and well-being among incarcerated women.

This study carries important implications for correctional facilities, policy, and future research. Correctional institutions must strengthen health, wellness, and mental health

programs, ensuring that exercise, counseling, and educational opportunities are institutionalized rather than occasional. Faith-based and spiritual activities should continue to be supported, as they play a vital role in resilience and coping. Correctional staff should be trained in gender-sensitive and dignity-affirming approaches that recognize the specific needs of women in detention. Provision of basic needs, including consistent access to food, water, hygiene, and menstrual health products, must also be prioritized.

At the policy level, prison congestion should be addressed by developing alternatives to incarceration for nonviolent offenses and expanding funding for gender-sensitive correctional programs. Government should also strengthen crisis-preparedness systems to ensure continuity of health services, visitation, and support programs in the event of future emergencies. Collaboration with civil society and NGOs is likewise critical, as external organizations can provide supplementary psychosocial, livelihood, and wellness initiatives.

Future research should explore the long-term effects of pandemic-induced coping mechanisms on post-release reintegration and rehabilitation outcomes among female PDLs. Comparative studies across different facilities, male populations, and geographic contexts would help establish whether the strategies identified in this study are widespread or unique to particular groups. Mixed-method approaches combining qualitative and quantitative data could also better capture the impact of coping strategies on inmates' well-being and rehabilitation.

Although this study was limited by its small sample size and focus on a single facility, its findings provide valuable insights into the gendered experiences of incarcerated women during a global health crisis. It affirms that female PDLs are not passive victims of carceral neglect but active agents of resilience, adaptation, and personal growth. However, their resilience should not be mistaken as a substitute for institutional responsibility. Rather, it should motivate reforms that balance individual agency with systemic support.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was not supported by any funding but the APC was paid by STI West Negros University.

Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards and research protocols of STI West Negros University. All procedures involving human participants complied with the Philippine National Ethical Guidelines for Health and Health-Related Research and the institutional policies for the protection of research participants.

AI Declaration

The authors acknowledge the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools in the preparation of this manuscript. Specifically, Grammarly was used for grammar checking and language refinement, while ChatGPT was employed to assist in summarizing key points, organizing thematic conclusions, paraphrasing ideas, and drafting sections of the manuscript, including the literature review, methodology, and conclusion. All AI-assisted content was thoroughly reviewed, verified, and edited by the author to ensure accuracy, integrity, and consistency with the study's objectives. The authors assume full responsibility for the final content of the manuscript.

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