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WHISPERS OF REFORM: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF FEMALE INMATES ON INMATE WELFARE AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM (IWPD)

Claire P. Dumaran, Marialyn C. Dumahil, Khia D. Saldasal, Shyra Mae B. Rahiol, Jackielou B. Alfar, Jeza M. Morito

Foundation University, Dumaguete City, Negros Oriental, Philippines

ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of ten female inmates participating in the Inmate Welfare and Development Program (IWDP) at the Provincial Jail in the Philippines. The purpose was to understand, through their own voices, how incarcerated women experience rehabilitation, their successes, struggles, and silent transformations. Using a descriptive phenomenological design, the researchers conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed following Colaizzi's method. Three major themes emerged from their stories: (1) Spiritual Renewal through Religious Programming (The Alchemy of Spiritual Rebirth, Battling the Demons Within), where women spoke of faith helping them forgive themselves, resist old cravings, and find peace amid guilt; (2) Skills Development and Economic Empowerment (Weaving Worth from Nothing, The Painful Art of Self-Reconstruction), which revealed how the inmates learned to make crafts, cook, or complete ALS, which gave them back a sense of dignity and purpose, proving they could still provide for their families even behind bars; and (3) Healing Hands Behind Bars (Where Pain Meets Medicine, The Body Remembers), showing that accessible healthcare and simple acts of concern from nurses and guards reminded these women that their bodies and lives still mattered. The findings revealed women finding hope, reclaiming their worth, and experiencing care, yet program gaps and gender bias remained painful realities. The IWDP plants seeds of reform, but systemic change is still needed. Recommendations include expanding ALS and TESDA, formalizing peer mentoring, prerelease counseling, and post-release job assistance.

Keywords: *Female inmates, healthcare access, Inmate Welfare and Development Program (IWDP), lived experiences, Provincial Jail in the Philippines, rehabilitation, skills development, spiritual renewal*

INTRODUCTION

The global female incarceration rate has surged by approximately 60% since 2000, a growth rate that dramatically outpaces that of men (Salisbury & Crawford, 2025), highlighting a critical and growing issue within criminal justice systems. Women enter prison through distinct pathways, with over 90% experiencing trauma during their childhood and more than 70% facing intimate partner violence, mental health needs, and being a primary caregiver (Council on Criminal Justice, 2024). Yet correctional policies and facilities are largely designed for men, creating a systematic mismatch that amplifies these obstacles. Moreover, as McLeod et al. (2025) highlighted, there was a profound lack of qualitative insight into the subjective, lived experiences of female Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDLs).

In the Philippines, data shows that female Persons Deprived of Liberty PDLs constitute 8.52% of the total 9,801 as of July 31, 2025 (Bureau of Jail Management and Penology, 2025). In line with this, the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP) implements the Inmate Welfare and Development Program (IWDP), a comprehensive rehabilitation framework that provides education, skills training, healthcare, and livelihood support to prepare PDLs for reintegration into society (Millet, 2026). However, the restrictive jail environment can limit emotional healing, personal growth, and full participation in such programs (Munoz, 2021).

While the IWDP provides a comprehensive rehabilitation framework, existing research has largely focused on program outcomes rather than on PDLs' personal journeys. A recent phenomenological study by Arquesola and Sabijon (2025) explored the experiences of female Persons Deprived of Liberty in rehabilitation programs at the Cebu City Jail Female Dormitory, revealing both positive themes such as skills development and peer support, alongside negative experiences including isolation and inadequate services. However, their study focused on general rehabilitation experiences, leaving a gap in understanding how female inmates experience the full spectrum of Inmate Welfare and Development Program services at a provincial jail in the Philippines. Research to date prioritizes quantitative metrics over personal emotions, motivations, and inner transformations. This gap motivates a phenomenological investigation into how female PDLs experience the IWDP at a provincial jail in the Philippines.

The literature cries out a truth that numbers cannot muffle. More than 90% of incarcerated women were once little girls who were not kept safe. Over 70% have known the terror of a partner's fists. Most are mothers whose children now fall asleep waiting for a voice they cannot hear (Council on Criminal Justice, 2024; Edwards et al., 2022). These are not abstract figures. These are women whose bodies remember every wound, whose hearts ache for every lost birthday, whose hands once held drugs because survival left them no other choice. Yet within the same pages of research, a different story fights to be heard.

It is the story of a woman who finds God inside a jail cell and discovers that forgiveness begins with herself (Jang & Johnson, 2022a; Ramirez, 2023). It is the story of a mother who learns to stitch voodoo dolls and, for the first time in years, sends money home, proving to her children that she is still their provider (Bersamina et al., 2021; Isidro et al., 2022; Millet, 2026). It is the story of a woman whose fever is noticed, whose medicine is given, whose failing body is treated not as a criminal's burden but as a human being's rightful claim to care (Lacuesta, 2025; Elino & Aldaba, 2025; Nieva, 2024). These women are not waiting for reform to be handed to them. They are building it with trembling hands, with whispered prayers, with the quiet, ferocious determination to become someone their children can still be proud of. The Inmate Welfare and Development Program does not save them. It gives them the tools to save themselves. And this study exists to ensure that no one calls their transformation a statistic ever again.

The researchers pursued this study because each incarcerated woman carried a silent, aching story that deserved to be heard and valued. By immersing themselves in the female PDLs' lived experiences, they aimed to reveal the hidden currents of healing, hope, and reclaimed identity that conventional statistics obscured. Their purpose was to translate raw data into a compassionate narrative that honors the resilience nurtured by the Inmate Welfare and Development Program. Through this heartfelt exploration, they hoped to inspire gender-sensitive reforms that nurtured dignity rather than merely enforce discipline. Ultimately, the study sought to transform sorrow into strength, offering a beacon of hope for every woman daring to imagine life beyond confinement.

Research Question

This phenomenological study aimed to explore the lived experiences of female inmates participating in IWDP at the Provincial Jail in the Philippines. It was guided by one central research question:

> What are the lived experiences of female PDLs participating in the inmate welfare and development program at the Provincial Jail?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used a qualitative design to explore the personal experiences of female PDLs in the IWDP at the Provincial Jail. It employed transcendental (descriptive) phenomenology, a method developed by Edmund Husserl to describe the essence of experience by bracketing the researcher's preconceptions and allowing the phenomenon to reveal itself through the participants' descriptions (Creswell, 2007). Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews that used open-ended questions to elicit rich narratives, followed by clarifying and probing questions to deepen understanding. The analysis aimed to produce a thick, rich description of the data, creating detailed narratives that identified patterns and themes while ensuring the participants' voices remained central to the findings.

Research Locale

The interviews were conducted at the Provincial Jail in the Philippines, which houses a total of 50 personnel with their respective weekly rotations. As of 2026, the total number of inmates is 434. Two hundred sixty-seven (267) male inmates encompass the North Wing and 157 are in the South Wing. Only 10 female inmates are in the Female Dorm. As the primary provincial jail, this facility houses both pre-trial detainees and convicted offenders and implements various programs for custody and rehabilitation under the IWDP framework. Its location within the city's urban center makes it accessible to government agencies, legal counsels, and organizations providing support and intervention services. The Provincial Jail serves as the primary detention and rehabilitation facility accommodating individuals awaiting trial as well as those serving short-term sentences. Over the years, the number of PDLs has continued to rise. The provincial jail was built sometime around 1920, and being an old and outdated facility, it required major upgrading. In response, the provincial government allocated PHP 5 million to rehabilitate the facility (Partlow, 2022). This situation affected not only the physical living conditions of the PDLs but also the delivery and overall quality of rehabilitation programs within the facility at the time of the study.

Research Participants

Since this study focuses on the IWDP at the Provincial Jail in the Philippines, the participants selected were female PDLs undergoing IWDP activities inside the facility at the time of data collection.

A purposive sampling method was employed to select these participants. The participants were required to meet the following criterion: they must be female PDLs currently incarcerated at the Provincial Jail, actively participating in any component of the IWDP, including education, skills training, livelihood, health services, religious activities, recreation, or peer support programs, and incarcerated for a minimum of six months to ensure stabilized experiences of program participation. Initially, only female PDLs who had been incarcerated for at least six months were considered for inclusion. This criterion was intended to ensure that the data collected reflected firsthand, stabilized experiences of program participation rather than observations from those in early adjustment phases. However, when this requirement resulted in an insufficient number of participants, the researchers adjusted the inclusion criterion by reducing the minimum incarceration period to three months to ensure an adequate sample size while still prioritizing participants with meaningful exposure to the IWDP. This research applied Colaizzi’s method to analyze data pertaining to the lived experiences of female PDLs. This study involved a total of ten participants, determined through data saturation, the point at which no new themes or insights emerged from additional interviews.

Research Instrument

The primary method of data collection was the semi-structured interview. The interview questions were crafted to explore initial impressions and experiences upon entering the IWDP, daily routines and participation in various program components, significant

moments or turning points during rehabilitation, relationships with peers, facilitators, and staff, changes in self-perception, identity, and future outlook, challenges encountered and coping strategies developed, and personal meaning and value derived from program participation. During each interview, the conversation was audio-recorded to ensure accuracy, and researchers simultaneously took detailed notes to capture non-verbal cues and immediate observations. To maintain methodological rigor and self-awareness, researchers kept a journal to document personal reactions, emerging insights, and any assumptions that arose before, during, and after data collection. The audio recordings were later transcribed verbatim by the researchers. This combination of semi-structured questioning, precise audio documentation, and reflective journaling was chosen to facilitate a rich, participant-centered exploration of the phenomenon while supporting the phenomenological principles of bracketing and depth.

Data Gathering Procedure

The data gathering took place on February 13 and 14, 2026. Prior to recruitment and interviews, the researchers prepared and submitted a formal transmittal letter along with the interview guide to the administration of the Provincial Jail for review and approval. This step ensured that the research design aligned with institutional policies and ethical standards. Once approval was granted, potential participants were formally contacted through the office of the facility head. A detailed letter explaining the study's purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature was distributed to eligible female inmates. Following their agreement to participate, the researchers scheduled individual interview sessions in a designated private area within the facility to ensure confidentiality and minimize distractions.

In the pre-interview phase, before each interview, participants were provided with a consent form to confirm their voluntary participation. The researchers orally explained the research objectives, confidentiality safeguards, and the audio- recording procedure. Participants were assured that they could skip any question or withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. They were also informed that pseudonyms would be used in all transcripts and reports to protect their identity.

During the interview phase, each semi-structured interview lasted between 20 to 60 minutes, depending on the participant's willingness to share and the depth of responses. Follow-up and clarifying questions were posed during the sessions to deepen the exploration of experiences. Researchers maintained a flexible, conversational tone to put participants at ease while gently guiding the discussion toward the research objectives. Over the two-day data gathering period, all scheduled interviews were completed within the facility's operating hours and in coordination with jail personnel to ensure minimal disruption to the inmates' daily routines.

In the post-interview phase, immediately after each interview, the researchers thanked the participants for their time and reminded them that they might be contacted for member checking at a later stage.

RESULTS

After the researcher's thorough analysis of the interview transcripts, a total of three emergent themes were identified. Each major theme covers two subthemes, namely, A) Spiritual Renewal through Religious Programming: 1) The Alchemy of Spiritual Rebirth and 2) Battling the Demons Within; B) Skills Development and Economic Empowerment: 3) Weaving Worth from Nothing and 4) The Painful Act of Self-Reconstruction; and C) Healing Hands Behind Bars: 5) Where Pain Meets Medicine and 6) The Body Remembers.

Emergent Theme 1: Spiritual Renewal through Religious Programming

Female inmates within the facility describe their experiences of engaging in religious activities as a transformative process that fosters inner healing and personal renewal. Through consistent participation in prayer, worship services, and spiritual reflections, many women begin to reassess their past actions and develop a deeper sense of accountability and purpose. These religious programs provide them with a space for emotional release, self-forgiveness, and moral guidance, allowing them to gradually rebuild their identity beyond their past mistakes. For many participants, spirituality becomes a source of strength that helps them cope with guilt, loneliness, and uncertainty while also guiding them toward a more disciplined and meaningful way of life. As they strengthen their faith, they begin to cultivate hope, resilience, and a renewed commitment to change, viewing their incarceration not only as punishment but also as an opportunity for spiritual growth and transformation.

Theme 1: The Alchemy of Spiritual Rebirth

The concept of this theme captures the transformative journey of the female inmates as they undergo spiritual renewal through religious programming within the facility. The term “alchemy” symbolizes a deep internal change, where individuals move from a state of brokenness, guilt, and past mistakes into a renewed sense of purpose, faith, and identity. Through prayer, worship, and spiritual teachings, the participants begin to reflect on their past actions, seek forgiveness, and rebuild their relationship with God. This process allows them to develop inner peace, emotional healing, and a stronger commitment to personal change, demonstrating that spiritual growth plays a vital role in their rehabilitation.

Participant 1 reflected on how religious activities helped her and her fellow inmates change from their old ways, stating: *Tapos naa me mga religious activities in which nga nakatabang kanamo nga kana bang mausob me ba…mausob me sa among way nga pamaagi namo nga sauna namo nga unsa me sa gawas, mao meng napunta me dire sa sulod.* (Trans: Then we have religious activities which helped us to change... To change our old ways, what we were like outside, that's why we ended up here inside.)

This reflects how the participant recognizes that religious activities serve as a catalyst for personal transformation, helping her and others move away from their past behaviors

and toward a new path.

The same participant shared her experience of spiritual awakening and realization, stating:

> *Naay nausab jud, sa Ginoo. Kay sauna, naa ko sa gawas, latagaw ra kaayo ko. Kanang suroy kay suroy ra ba. Bisyo kay bisyo, mangita ra gud ko'g example, inom, sigarilyo. Karon, wala na. Naa koy makit an, mora kog…lod on ko ba. Ing ana ra. Makakita og manigarilyo man gane,morag kanang lod on nako. Makausab gyud.*
>
> Trans: (There really are changes, with God. Because before, when I was outside, I was so lost. Just wandering around. Having vices, I would look for, for example, drinking, smoking. Now, none of that. When I see it, I feel… Like I'm disgusted. That's it. If I see someone smoking, I feel disgusted. It really changes you.)

This indicates a moment of spiritual reflection where the participant becomes aware of her past promises and is reminded of her responsibility to change. It highlights how faith encourages accountability and personal transformation.

Participant 1 also demonstrated how spiritual growth influences her behavior and mindset, stating, *sauna sa gawas, di kayko hilig og kanang religious. Dire ra jud ko nahilig or religious.* (Trans: Before, outside, I wasn't really into religious things. It was only here that I became interested in religious things.)

This shows that the participant developed a stronger interest in religious activities during her stay in the facility. Her spiritual growth not only changed her mindset but also redirected her focus toward faith, which became a meaningful part of her daily life behind bars.

Participant 5 expressed her newfound faith with certainty and conviction, stating*, niya karon moingon jud ko karon nga naa gud diay Ginoo. Buhi jud siya, hikapon jud ka niya.* (Trans: But now, I can really say that God exists)

Theme 2: Battling the Demons Within

This theme highlights the internal struggles experienced by the female inmates as they confront their past behaviors, emotional burdens, and personal weaknesses. Despite being physically confined, the greater battle occurs within them facing temptations, guilt, longing, and the desire to change. These struggles often involve resisting old habits, managing emotional pain and seeking forgiveness. Through reflection, discipline, and spiritual guidance, the participants gradually develop self-awareness and inner strength, showing that true rehabilitation begins from within.

Participant 1 reflected on her struggle with physical urges and how rehabilitation has helped her overcome them, stating, *naa may times nga magbulong ko, naa juy times nga*

magbulong akong lawas pero karon nga naa me, na rehabilitate me dire, feel nako kuan na di nako ganahan. (Trans: There are times when I crave it, there are times my body looks for it, but now that I am here and being rehabilitated, I feel like I don't want it anymore.)

This shows that the participant is battling internal cravings and addiction. However, through rehabilitation, she begins to gain control over these urges, reflecting personal growth and change.

Participant 2 expressed how religious participation provided emotional relief and hope, stating:

> *Kuan, makagaan. Gaan kaayo sa paminaw kay siyempre kabahin og Ginoo. Mora guro'g ma-, ay dili mora, ma mora'g- ay dili mora (laughs) 'sa pa, mora'g ma- ay mora'g japon. Mawala imong mga sala kay silbe, nakasala man me mao nang naabot me dire. Kanang nakuan namo nga naa pay-, dili pa ulahi ang tanan nga mag bag o.*
>
> Trans: (It feels light. Very light in feeling because of course it's about God. It's like it's-, oh not like, it's like- oh not like (laughs) wait, it's like- it's still like. Your sins disappear because we sinned, that's why we ended up here. That we realize that there's still-, it's not too late to change.)

This reflects how the participant finds psychological and emotional relief through religious participation. By acknowledging her sins and connecting them to her current situation, she experiences a sense of lightness and hope. The message that changes are still, possibly, becomes a powerful motivator for her internal battle against past mistakes.

Participant 3 shared her emotional struggle and realization, stating, *Kuan.. ang akong jung mabuhat kanang maka feel kog kalaay, mingaw, ampo. Ampo ra jud ko.. kay wala man tay lain ka.. kagunitan.* (Trans: The only thing I can really do when I feel bored or lonely is pray. I just pray… because there's nothing else, I can hold on to.)

This shows that the participant relies on prayer as her sole anchor during moments of loneliness and boredom. Her statement reveals a deep sense of isolation, yet also a resilient turn toward faith when no other comfort is available. Prayer becomes not just a spiritual act but a lifeline that helps her endure the emotional weight of incarceration.

Participant 7 shared her emotional struggle and realization, stating:

> *Uh mu, usahay, makaingon ko na 'mura mag ing..' mura mag irita pa ka ba hangtud na naay mahinuktok na ka nga musulod sa imong huna-huna nga importante gyud diay nga mu-ampo gyud ka kay para mapasaylo imong kaugalingon ba kay maghilak bya ka anang mingawon kas imong mga bata.*
>
> Trans: (Sometimes I feel irritated, until I realize that I need to pray so I can forgive myself, because I cry when I miss my children.)

Emergent Theme 2: Skills Development and Economic Empowerment

Inside the facility, the participants discover they can do things they never imagined, like making voodoo dolls, weaving rugs, writing scripture, cooking for guards, and playing guitar. These activities provide more than income; they provide proof of worth. Women who see themselves as failures, addicts, or criminals begin to see themselves as skilled, productive, and capable. The small earnings they send to their families become powerful symbols that they are still mothers, still providers, still valuable members of their families despite incarceration. Through these activities, they reconstruct their identities from the ground up.

Theme 3: Weaving Worth from Nothing

Through livelihood programs and skills training, the participants literally and figuratively weave new lives for themselves. The same hands that once held drugs now craft voodoo dolls, prepare snacks for sale, and transcribe scripture for payment. These activities are not mere pastimes; they are structured interventions that provide tangible economic benefits and psychological rewards. The cooperative system allows them to display and sell their products, generating income that reaches their families outside. The Written Bible activity combines spiritual practice with economic necessity, paying for scripture transcription. Even small earnings become powerful affirmations of worth, proof that they can contribute, produce, and provide.

Participant 2 elevates the act of maintaining a religious life to the level of a skill, framing the disciplined effort to leave behind wrongdoing as a significant personal achievement. She shared:

> *Skills, kuan naa pod me katong morag making kay nianhe dire ang PESO. Dayon voodoo doll, maggama og katong sa siquijor katong psa yarn. Dayon mao ra then kanang sa among religious, skills gihapon na sha kay lisod kaayo gikan kas kadautan dayon mo religious ka kay-, pero dili gihapon kuan, okay ra japon.*
>
> Trans: (Skills, we have like making because PESO came here. Then voodoo doll, we make those from Siquijor. Then that's it and then with our religious activities, that's also a skill because it's hard to come from evil and then you become religious, but it's still okay.)

Participant 4 engaged in micro-entrepreneurship by preparing and selling local snacks, reflecting a drive to remain productive and utilize available resources. She stated, *kuan naninda kog shakoy, binangkal kaning bananaque, pero kajot rapud.* (Trans: I sold shakoy, binangkal, and bananaque, just for a short period of time.)

The same participant describes how participation in the facility's livelihood program is driven by a deep sense of familial duty. She explained:

> *Oh diha, I display diris kuop, oh, maoy ako na experience diri nga, nag, nag*

> *kuan ko ug naningkamot ko para rapud sa akong pamilya nga maka supporta ko nila, niya ug sa among udong nga gitagaan mi ug livelihood diri nga maka income mi paras among pang adlaw adlaw, mao rapud akong experience diri.*
>
> Trans: (So there, I'll display it here in the coop. That's my experience here. I worked hard and I'm striving, really for my family, so I can support them. And also, for our 'udong.' They gave us a livelihood here so we can earn an income for our daily needs. That's really my experience here.)

Participant 5 joins the Written Bible activity where transcribing scripture earns her money, giving her something productive to do while generating income. She shared:

> *Ohh, mag written bible mi ug wami mga lingaw mag written bible mi, katong sa mga koreano ba, ug maka human mig bible, like kani nga orange ug mahuman nimo ni siya gikan diri sa mateo, ah kuan sa mateo, mateo hangtud a gipadayag ug makahuman jud ka aning iyahang, kani nga book maayung balita maka one thousand ka.*
>
> Trans: (Ohh, we do written Bible activities. When we have nothing to do, we do written Bible. Like with the Koreans, if you finish a Bible, like this orange one, from Matthew to Revelation, you get one thousand.)

Theme 4: The Painful Art of Self-Reconstruction

For the first time, many participants look in the mirror and see someone they can respect. Through program participation, they develop self-trust and confidence in their own capabilities. They discover talents they never knew they possessed, from playing guitar to completing their education. The facility provides opportunities that were impossible on the outside, where survival demands left no time for personal growth. This reconstruction of self is not easy; it requires confronting past failures and embracing new identities. Yet through this painful process, they emerge with a firm conviction that they can stand on their own, raise their children alone, and build lives that do not return to prison.

Participant 1 gained new skills, such as playing the guitar, while in the facility, contributing to personal development. She shared, *Sa gawas gud, di ko kabalo mo guitar, dire nako nakabalo'g guitar.* (Trans: Outside, I didn't know how to play guitar, here I learned to play guitar.)

Participant 4 finally finished school through ALS inside the jail, something she always wanted but never had time for outside because she was too busy raising her children. She explained:

> *Kay, kay diri naka human man kog kuan, naka skwela kog ALS, didto diman nako mabuhat, ahm, naka skwela kog ALS diri, ako ng gipangandoy sa gawas, mo skwela ko niya wala namay oras kay kaning naa nakay anak, kinahanglan man ka muhatag ug balon, makaon, nasulod ko diri, naka*

skwela kog ALS.

Trans: (Because here, I was able to finish something, I studied ALS. I couldn't do that out there. I studied ALS here. That was my dream outside, to study, but there was no time anymore because when you already have children, you need to provide allowance, food. I got inside here, and I was able to study ALS.)

The same participant now trusts both God and her own self, believing she can stand on her own and raise her child alone. She stated:

Oh, murag na kuan na, kanang nidangop nako niya, naa nakoy, nakoy pagsalig nasa Ginoo ug sa akong kaugalingon nga kaya diay nako ni, kaya nako ni tindugan nga wala koy kauban, kaya nako mabuhi akong anak nga ako ra.

Trans: (Yes, it's like I turned to Him. I now have trust in God and in myself, that I can actually do this. I can stand on my own without anyone. I can support my child by myself.)

Participant 10 explains that playing guitar inside the center has become a meaningful and focused pursuit, unlike their casual attempts outside due to the distractions of vices, because the structured environment provides dedicated time, peer support, and learning materials. She shared:

Ah, guitar ra. Kay sauna man guds gawas apil kog ingon ana kanang kuan-kuan kay kay kani laging bisyuso ka dili ka mag focus, gunit-gunit pud kog guitar saunas gawas. Wala ra nako gi mind kay dili pariha diri ba ma focus jud ka kay kuan man every cell namo naa ma goy mo guitar kay ana but-in but-in man. Naay katong bag ong laya namo katu nitudlo pero naa pud mi libro akong rang gikat-on gitunan pud.

Trans: (Ah, just guitar. Because before, outside, I would join those kinds of things, but you know, being a user, you can't focus. I would also hold a guitar outside. I just didn't mind it, because it's not like here where you can really focus because every cell, someone plays guitar, it's like they join in. There was a newly released person who taught us, but we also have a book. I just learned on my own, studied it.)

Emergent Theme 3: Healing Hands Behind Bars

Inside the facility, the body does not stop demanding attention. Illness comes, cravings resurface, and physical self requires care. Through health services provided within the walls, participants find that their bodies are not forgotten. Nurses are available, medicines are given, and protocols exist for more serious conditions requiring outside referral. Beyond reactive treatment, there is also preventive care: regular check-ups, enforced sleep schedules, and proactive health monitoring. These services send a powerful

message: even here, even now, their health matters. Their bodies are still worth caring for.

Theme 5: Where Pain Meets Medicine

When pain comes, whether it is a simple cold or something more serious, participants find that medical care is accessible. A nurse is present, a clinic exists, and there is a clear pathway from reporting illness to receiving treatment. Guards serve as intermediaries, relaying health concerns to medical staff who then come to check on inmates. For minor ailments, personal medicine stocks and facility-provided medications offer relief. For conditions beyond the facility's capacity, a referral system connects inmates to outside hospitals. This structured healthcare access ensures that physical suffering does not go unaddressed, that pain meets medicine.

Participant 1 confirms the availability of immediate healthcare access through an onsite nurse. She shared, *if…if magsakit mo dire, ma'am, ma checkup ra pod mo dayon? …oo, naa raman pod me nurse.* (Trans: If…if you get sick here, ma'am, can you get checked up right away?...Yes, we have a nurse.)

The same participant describes the structured healthcare access process where guards serve as intermediaries between inmates and medical staff. She explained, *og naa me bal-, naa me bation, moingon sa me sa guwardiya, kay ang guwardiya na ang mo relay sa nurse. Ang nurse mo anhi man pod namo dire para checkupon me.* (Trans: If we feel ill, we tell the guard, because the guard will relay to the nurse. The nurse will come here to check on us.)

Participant 5 describes the presence of a clinic and nurse, the availability of personal medicine stocks, facility-provided medications, and established protocols requiring consultation for stronger medicines. She stated:

> *Naa raman ang amo clinic si nurse ba, ig unsay among gibati, bag o raman galain ako paminaw, wala rako hilanti piro gi ubog sip on ko, naa rapud koy stock nga tambal, gihatagan rapud mi, katong pang anti biotic kinahanglan mo consult gud ka niya.*
>
> Trans: (We have our clinic with the nurse. Whatever we're feeling, just recently, I wasn't feeling well. It wasn't serious, just colds, but I had my own stock of medicine. They also give us medicine. For antibiotics, you really need to consult with her first.)

Participant 9 describes the complete healthcare pathway: reporting through guards, nurse consultation, external hospital referral when needed, and medicine provision, all provided by the facility. She shared:

> *Muingon ra nag unsay mga, unsay mga kuan, bation musugo ra mis guwardya nya ang gwardya ra pd ang mu inform didtos nurse na muari diri*

so, if di madala nila, ila na pd ikuan nga ieschedule ka didtog check up, eh ah provided man pd nila, naa man puy mga tambal (mahatag ra pd) oh mahatagan ra pd ug tambal.

Trans: (We just ask the guard to inform the nurse, and the guard will notify the nurse to come here. If they cannot handle it here, they will schedule you for a check-up outside. It is provided for us, and medicines are also given when needed.)

Theme 6: The Body Remembers

Beyond treating illness, the facility also works to prevent it. Regular health monitoring means that staff do not wait for inmates to get sick. They ask, they check, they pay attention. Enforced sleep schedules, explained as health concerns, ensure that bodies get the rest they need.

This proactive approach acknowledges that the body remembers. It remembers the exhaustion of addiction, the neglect of the past, the toll that years of hard living have taken. Through monitoring and preventive care, the facility tells inmates that their bodies are worth protecting, that their health is worth watching over.

Participant 9 confirms nurse availability and describes proactive health monitoring where staff regularly inquire about inmate health. She stated*, oo naa man mi nurse, oh ug naa koy reklamo mu anhi ra, sila ray mag-mag- pangutana man na sila diri sa mga kuan PDL.* (Trans: Yes, we have a nurse here. If I have complaints, I just go to them. They also ask the PDLs about their condition.)

The same participant interprets enforced sleep schedules as evidence of staff concern for inmate health and well-being. She explained, *wala, concern kaayo sila munang dili pd mi pwede, naa muy mi oras, na magabie unsa gd oras matulog.* (Trans: No. They are very concerned about us. That's why we are not allowed to stay up late. We have a specific time to sleep at night.)

She explicitly states that daily routines, including sleep schedules, are designed for health monitoring purposes. She shared, *oh kay para nga kuan kanang ma monitor ba amoang kuan health.* (Trans: Yes, because they want to monitor our health condition.)

DISCUSSION

Within the first emergent theme, "Spiritual Renewal through Religious Programming," the participants articulated that religious programming served as a transformative catalyst, facilitating a shift from guilt and self-condemnation to moral rebirth. The women described how consistent engagement in prayer, worship, and Bible study allowed them to reassess their past actions, develop self-forgiveness, and view their incarceration not merely as punishment but as an opportunity for spiritual growth and personal renewal.

The first sub-theme, “The Alchemy of Spiritual Rebirth,” captured the participants’ profound internal change wherein they moved from a state of brokenness to a renewed sense of purpose and faith. Jang and Johnson (2022a) emphasized that spiritual development plays an important role in rebuilding values and strengthening inner discipline. Arquesola and Sabijon (2025) found that spiritual engagement fosters hope and resilience among female Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDLs). Ramirez (2023) noted that prayer and spiritual activities promote self-forgiveness and lasting transformation.

The second sub-theme, “Battling the Demons Within,” revealed that participants confronted internal struggles against cravings, guilt, and the emotional weight of past failures. Hechanova et al. (2026) looked closely at the Katatagan, Kalusugan at Damayan ng Komunidad (KKDK) drug counseling program and discovered that structured rehabilitation interventions, particularly those incorporating recovery skills and life skills, showed stronger effects for female participants in overcoming substance use disorders. Jolly and Corona (2026) found that boredom, interpersonal conflicts, and emotional distress are major concerns for incarcerated individuals, and that positive coping mechanisms such as meditation and self-reflection are critical for managing these internal challenges. Jang and Johnson (2022b) further supported the fact that inmates cope with prison challenges by turning to faith in God, maintaining positive outlooks, keeping themselves occupied, and joining religious activities.

The second emergent theme, “Skills Development and Economic Empowerment,” elucidated that participation in livelihood and skills development programs restored the participants’ dignity and provided a pathway to economic empowerment. The women described how acquiring vocational skills and completing educational goals through the Alternative Learning System (ALS) allowed them to reconstruct their identities as capable, productive providers for their families. Even small earnings from handicrafts or scripture transcription served as powerful affirmations of worth, proving that they remained valuable members of their families despite being behind bars.

The third sub-theme, “Weaving Worth from Nothing,” showed how livelihood programs helped incarcerated women rebuild their self-worth by letting them create something useful and earn money. Bersamina et al. (2021) found that vocational and livelihood programs give Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDLs) “a sense of purpose and direction,” which fights back against the hopelessness that so often comes with being in jail. Kilat et al. (2025) looked at community extension programs for PDLs and saw that learning new skills improved their mental health, helped them grow as people, and gave them a stronger sense of meaning in life. Luceño (2024) studied the Therapeutic Community Modality Program (TCMP) and found that learning livelihood skills helped former inmates grow as individuals, taught them discipline, and turned their time in jail into a chance to become productive, not just to serve time.

The fourth sub-theme, “The Painful Art of Self-Reconstruction,” showed that participants rebuilt self-trust and confidence through educational and skill-building opportunities. Isidro et al. (2022) studied incarcerated mothers in the Alternative Learning System (ALS) and identified themes of “winning over emotional and psychological anxieties, seeing the silver lining, and determination to freedom.” Jolly and Corona (2026) found that learning

programs boost life satisfaction and personal growth among PDLs. Chikaodili and Mahinay (2025) talked to ALS participants in Northern Mindanao and discovered that PDLs had a real desire to learn on their own, took initiative, and felt motivated from within, which led to better results in their education..

Moreover, the fourth emergent theme, “Healing Hands Behind Bars,” showed that structured healthcare pathways within the correctional facility affirmed the participants’ humanity by ensuring that physical well-being was not neglected. The women described how the presence of a nurse, the availability of a clinic, and clear protocols for reporting illness communicated a powerful message that even incarcerated women are worth caring for. Preventive care, including regular health monitoring and enforced sleep schedules, further demonstrated that staff did not wait for inmates to become ill but actively attended to their health needs.

The seventh sub-theme, “Where Pain Meets Medicine,” described a structured and accessible healthcare pathway, including nurse presence, clinic access, and clear protocols for treatment. Lacuesta (2025) studied Dumaguete City jail facilities and found that the availability of health services was the strongest predictor of healthcare access among PDLs, with incarcerated women having significantly higher odds of accessing healthcare compared to males. Elino and Aldaba (2025) looked at how tuberculosis was prevented in Davao City Jail and stressed that checking on inmates’ health before they get seriously sick, along with regular health screenings, is essential for stopping the spread of disease in crowded jails.

Finally, the eighth sub-theme, “The Body Remembers,” captured the participants’ experience of preventive care through regular health monitoring, enforced sleep schedules, and proactive staff inquiries. Elino and Aldaba (2025) highlighted that preventive care, including regular health inquiries and structured routines, is essential for controlling disease and maintaining well-being in overcrowded jails. The adoption of the United Nations Bangkok Rules by the Bureau of Corrections (BuCor), the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP), and the Philippine Commission on Women (PCW) mandates comprehensive health services for Women Deprived of Liberty (WDL), including menstrual, maternity, breastfeeding, and menopause care, as well as pre- and post-natal medical examinations (Bureau of Corrections, 2026). Furthermore, the expansion of the Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (PhilHealth) KonSulTa program to correctional facilities ensures that access to quality health services is a right for all Filipinos (Philippine Health Insurance Corporation, 2025).

Conclusions

The study emphasizes the transformative impact of spiritual renewal on the lived experiences of female PDLs participating in the Inmate Welfare and Development Program (IWDP) at the Provincial Jail. Through prayer, worship, and faith-based activities, participants experienced emotional healing, self-reflection, and moral growth. Spiritual engagement enabled them to confront guilt, overcome destructive behaviors, and regain hope for a more meaningful future. The findings highlight the significant role of spirituality in fostering resilience, self-discipline, and personal reform among incarcerated women,

allowing them to redefine themselves beyond their past mistakes.

The findings also revealed the importance of skills development and educational opportunities in promoting empowerment and self-reconstruction among female PDLs. Participation in livelihood programs, vocational training, and the Alternative Learning System (ALS) strengthened participants' confidence, enhanced their practical knowledge, and provided opportunities to acquire meaningful skills. These experiences allowed PDLs to rediscover their abilities and rebuild their identities as productive and capable individuals. The study underscores that educational and livelihood interventions serve not only as tools for rehabilitation but also as pathways toward personal growth and successful reintegration into society.

Moreover, the study stresses the importance of accessible healthcare and preventive institutional care in maintaining the well-being and dignity of incarcerated women. The presence of healthcare services, including nursing assistance, medical consultations, routine health monitoring, and referral systems, ensured that participants' physical health needs were addressed despite the challenges of confinement. Preventive care practices further reinforced the institution's commitment to safeguarding the health of PDLs, highlighting that humane treatment and healthcare accessibility remain essential components of correctional rehabilitation.

Overall, the study highlights that the lived experiences of female PDLs are shaped by a holistic process of transformation that integrates spiritual growth, educational and livelihood empowerment, and institutional healthcare support. These elements work collectively in fostering personal reform, rebuilding self-worth, and strengthening hope for life beyond incarceration. Despite the challenges associated with confinement and reintegration, the findings suggest that meaningful rehabilitation programs provide women deprived of liberty with opportunities for healing, growth, and the possibility of rebuilding their lives.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, several recommendations are hereby offered:

Provincial Jail Administration

1. The administration may offer pre-release counseling sessions to help PDLs process guilt and emotional struggles before returning to the community.
2. The facility is encouraged to improve the cell infrastructure of the female dormitory and introduce new livelihood opportunities for the female PDLs.
3. The facility can work to maintain accessible health services, including regular check-ups and clear procedures for health-related concerns.

Provincial Government

1. The provincial government can look into providing job placement assistance and small business loans for formerly incarcerated women to help them achieve financial independence and overcome social stigma.
2. The provincial government is encouraged to monitor the funds allocated in improving the facility's physical infrastructure, especially spaces used for education, livelihood activities, and healthcare.
3. The government may support the expansion of ALS and TESDA programs inside the jail to increase educational and vocational opportunities.

Religious and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs)

1. These organizations may expand spiritual programs to include workshops on self-forgiveness and personal values.
2. They can explore ways to help inmates sell their handmade products and provide vocational training that may lead to steady post-release income.

Educational Institutions

1. Schools and universities may offer more diverse ALS learning materials and tutoring to help inmates build confidence and acquire new skills.
2. Institutions can invite former inmates who have successfully turned their lives around to share their stories, which may inspire current resident.

Research Institutions

1. Researchers may conduct long-term studies to track the effectiveness of the IWDP in reducing re-offending over several years.
2. Researchers can explore the experiences of women who have been released multiple times to better understand barriers to lasting change.
3. Comparative research between different jail facilities may be conducted to identify best practices that can be replicated elsewhere.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

This study adhered to ethical standards in conducting qualitative research involving incarcerated women at the Provincial Jail in the Philippines. Guided by the principles of autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice, the researchers ensured the protection, dignity, and well-being of all participants throughout the study. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was secured prior to data collection. The participants were informed of the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and the confidentiality of the information they shared. To protect privacy and minimize potential harm, pseudonyms were used, personal identifiers were excluded from the study, and all collected data were treated with strict confidentiality and respect. The interviews were conducted in a participant-centered and trauma-sensitive manner to

prioritize the emotional safety and comfort of the participants as vulnerable individuals deprived of liberty (Creswell, 2007).

To maintain the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the researchers employed practical approaches to minimize bias through team discussions, role differentiation, observational note-taking, and post-interview debriefing. Consistent with phenomenological practices of bracketing and reflexivity, the researchers consciously reflected on their assumptions and maintained awareness of potential biases throughout the inquiry. These practices, recommended in studies involving vulnerable groups, helped ensure that the findings remained grounded in the participants' lived realities rather than the researchers' preconceived interpretations (Barican et al., 2025). In addition, member checking was conducted to validate the authenticity and accuracy of the emergent findings, strengthening the credibility of the study (Gumarang et al., 2021). Together, these measures upheld ethical responsibility, integrity, confidentiality, and respect while ensuring that the voices and lived experiences of the participants were represented authentically and responsibly.

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claire.dumaran@foundatiounu.com
marialyn.dumahil@foundationu.com
khia.saldasal@foundationu.com
shyramae.rahiol@foundationu.com
jackielou.alfar@foundationu.com
jeza.morito@foundationu.com