

Racial Inequalities and Family Imprisonment: The Intersectional and Compounded Social Harms for Pakistani Women

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Scholarship on family member incarceration, and the gendered nature of this critical life event, has expanded rapidly in the last 20 years. Yet, in England and Wales, the experiences of racially minoritized women are unclear, despite stark racial disparities in the prison estate. Based on in-depth, qualitative interviews with British Pakistani women, this article makes a vital contribution to this lacuna in research. Using intersectionality as an analytical framework, it determines that these women's experiences are underpinned by wider racial and ethnic inequalities in broader social contexts, discrimination within the criminal justice and prison systems, and their social positioning in socio-political, biographic and historic contexts, which converge to severely compound the social harm experienced by this population.

KEY WORDS: Pakistani women, family imprisonment, intersectionality, racial inequality, social harm

INTRODUCTION

After remaining on the periphery of criminological discourse, research on prisoners' families has expanded significantly, in international and interdisciplinary contexts, in the last two decades. Academics have highlighted the gendered nature of this critical life event, as regardless of the inmate's gender, it is most commonly women who bear the responsibility of supporting the prisoner and caring for other family members during the sentence (Codd 2008; Comfort 2008). It is understood that women will experience multiple dimensions of social harm and exclusion following the incarceration of a family member, which often serve to compound pre-existing social inequality and disadvantage (Social Exclusion Unit 2002; Murray 2007; Halsey and Deegan 2015). These harms include material deprivation, disruption to employment, increased childcare

responsibilities, institutional stigma, social isolation, breakdowns in extended kin relationships, exposure to abuse and heightened risk of mental and physical health issues (see, e.g., [Braman 2002](#); [2004](#); [Comfort 2003](#); [Christian et al. 2006](#); [Condry 2007](#); [Codd 2008](#); [Arditti 2012](#); [Granja 2016](#)). These processes converge with prevailing systemic inequalities and gender-based disparities—such as the feminization of poverty, which exacerbates gender inequalities and restricts access to opportunities and capabilities—and may intensify for women affected by family member incarceration, compounding their subjugation ([Condry and Minson 2021](#)).

While these are important developments in understanding how criminal justice systems function to produce social harm, racially minoritized women's experiences have remained a blind spot in England and Wales. This oversight is particularly notable as racially minoritized groups are significantly over-represented in the prison estate and currently account for 27 per cent of the prison population ([Prison Reform Trust 2025](#)). This suggests that racially minoritized families are disproportionately harmed by family member incarceration, yet their experiences are ill-understood. Comparable patterns have been documented internationally, where research has demonstrated that racial disparities in criminal justice contexts can have profound consequences for families from these communities. In the United States, for example, scholars have argued that mass incarceration has occurred so ferociously that it has contributed to racial inequality on an aggregate scale, to the detriment of entire neighbourhoods and communities ([Alexander 2010](#); [Wakefield and Wildeman 2014](#); [Pettit and Gutierrez 2018](#)). The infiltration of the penal system in Black and other racially minoritized families' lives has been so pervasive that it has come to 'form part of a novel system of social inequality' ([Western 2006](#): xi) and has produced racial inequalities described to be invisible, cumulative and intergenerational for minority populations ([Western and Pettit 2010](#)). The disproportionate and disparate experiences of minoritized groups who are harmed by family member imprisonment have also been documented in other geographic contexts (see [Halsey 2018](#)).

Although the prison system in England and Wales has not expanded as dramatically as in the United States, it has grown substantially since the 1970s and continues to reflect deep racial inequalities. Despite the disproportionate presence of racially minoritized groups in prison, and the well-established gendered burdens placed on prisoners' families, little empirical attention has been paid to how race, gender and structural inequality intersect in the lives of women affected by imprisonment. In particular, the experiences of British Pakistani women—who occupy a distinct position within the racialized criminal justice landscape—have been largely absent from this literature. This article addresses that gap by presenting original qualitative research with British Pakistani women navigating the imprisonment of a close male relative—typically a husband, son or brother—who is also a British citizen. In doing so, it contributes to both prisoners' families' research and intersectional criminology by centring voices that remain on the margins of both.

To analytically situate these experiences, it is necessary to examine the broader social and political forces that shape how harm is produced and distributed. British Pakistani communities have long been positioned as suspect populations within the United Kingdom, particularly in the context of counterterrorism, surveillance and racialized criminal justice policies. This political backdrop informs not only how imprisonment is administered but also how its social consequences are felt by families and communities. Accordingly, this article draws on the framework of intersectionality to explore how 'race', ethnicity, gender and class intersect to compound the harms experienced by British Pakistani women. Scholars have argued that single-axis analyses are insufficient for capturing the realities of those positioned at the convergence of multiple systems of oppression ([Phillips and Webster 2013](#); [Potter 2015](#)). By foregrounding structural inequality across socio-political, institutional and biographical domains, this article illustrates how British Pakistani women experience carceral harm in ways that are cumulative, interdependent and largely *invisible in dominant criminological discourse*.

Pakistani families' experiences of criminalization and social and economic inequality

Focusing on Pakistani women and the wider Pakistani community, from criminological perspectives, is critical in this moment, because of the criminalization of this population in the last few decades (Goodey 2001). Research on this population has demonstrated how Pakistani men emerged as a new folk devil by the end of the last century, following several high-profile incidents. These included the backlash against the publication of *The Satanic Verses* in the late 1980s, opposition to the Gulf War in 1991, and the disturbances across Northern England cities in the mid-1990s (Alexander 2000). This era has been described as a watershed moment, which marked a shift in the public and political perception of the Asian community, from a passive, law-abiding population more likely to be victimized by crime to one perceived to be a threat to the fabric of British society and more likely to partake in criminality (Goodey 2001).

The Pakistani population was further problematized because of the riots in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham, in the summer of 2001 (Bagguley and Hussain 2008; Saeed 2017). Academic have identified the key role of far-right mobilizations in inciting these disturbances, and questionable police responses to the violence, as crucial factors leading to the events which took place in these towns (Bagguley and Hussain 2008). However, political and media narratives which emerged around these events fuelled a moral panic, portraying the Pakistani community as instigators and as particularly troublesome (Massey and Tatla 2012). The terrorist attacks on 9/11 and 7/7 also resulted in the politicized Pakistani identity becoming hyper-securitized, which subsequently 'framed every aspect of the Muslim existence within a narrative of insecurity and suspicion'¹ (Saeed 2017: 3). The Pakistani community has since become subjected to discriminatory and intrusive government policies and state surveillance (Tufail 2015). This has included being disproportionately targeted by the controversial Prevent strategy, which critics have argued has constituted the racial and religious profiling of the Muslim population (Kundnani 2014). Qurashi (2018) has drawn parallels between the underlying principles and operationalization of the Prevent strategy to colonial era surveillance strategies which were enforced to contain and manage unruly colonial subjects. The politicization and securitization of the Pakistani community in the United Kingdom, and the scrutiny under which this population has been placed, are understood to have caused feelings of alienation, social exclusion and isolation (Hussain and Bagguley 2013).

Most recently, the racialization of child sexual exploitation offences and the media rhetoric surrounding Pakistani grooming gangs has perpetuated the problematization of Pakistani communities and the depiction of Pakistani men as a contemporary folk devil (Gill and Harrison 2015; Tufail 2015). According to Cockbain and Tufail (2020: 3), this racialized portrayal of Pakistani men has been underpinned by 'Orientalist stereotypes' and has contributed to 'the demonization of whole communities and demands for collective responsibility'.

It is difficult to precisely account for how the politicization of this community has translated into criminal justice and penal contexts, as the Ministry of Justice does not record the ethnic identity of Pakistani prisoners beyond the category of *Asian*; however, Phillips and Webster (2013) were able to establish that Pakistani prisoners were over-represented in the criminal justice estate comparatively to Indian and Bangladeshi prisoners when detailed incarceration rates were last published in 2000. The use of umbrella terms such as *Asian* reinforces the need for intersectional analyses in criminal justice contexts, as Lammy (2017: 3) pointed out that 'the proportion of prisoners who are Asian is lower than the general population but, within categories such as "Asian" or "Black" there is considerable diversity, with some groups thriving while others struggle'.

¹ Saeed's study explores the securitization of the Muslim women in the United Kingdom but focuses specifically on the Pakistani community. Additionally, according to the Muslim Council of Britain (2015) a significant majority of Pakistanis in the UK identify with the Islamic faith.

The criminalization of the Pakistani community described in this article suggests that this population are among those struggling within the Asian category in the prison estate. Consequently, the incarceration of family members is likely to be unequally distributed within the Pakistani population and serve to disproportionately impact women and families from this community.

Besides the politicization of this population and its disparate treatment in the criminal justice system, Pakistani women are also likely to experience racial and ethnic inequalities across a range of other social contexts (Byrne *et al.* 2020). The Pakistani community's social and economic status has been significantly shaped by the combined effects of deindustrialization and systemic racism (Kalra 2000). Studies have highlighted that the Pakistani community is among the most socially disadvantaged and deprived groups in the United Kingdom, frequently enduring extensive and persistent economic hardship (Byrne *et al.* 2020; Khan 2020). The Pakistani population are 'the most likely to live in neighbourhoods deprived because of living environment, education, health or employment' (Stevenson *et al.* 2017: 6). Pakistani households (51 per cent) are more than two-and-a-half times more likely to live in poverty compared to White households (19 per cent) (Matejic *et al.* 2024). These patterns of poverty can be explained by a number of factors, including stark inequalities and disadvantages in the labour market (Matejic *et al.* 2024). Studies have found that the Pakistani population are over three times more likely to be unemployed than the White British community (Murray 2024), and Pakistani women are the most likely to be economically inactive among women from all ethnic groups (Clark and Shankley 2020). Researchers have attributed these disparities to racial and ethnic discrimination, as well as barriers such as the lack of recognition of formal qualifications and poor English language proficiency (Zwysen *et al.* 2019). Consequently, the average income in Pakistani households is approximately £8,700 lower than that of White households (Woodward 2018). The social and economic inequalities that characterize the lives of Pakistani communities are underpinned by structural and institutional racism, and drive social inequalities across other key dimensions, particularly housing (Rogaly *et al.* 2021) and health and social care (Nazroo 2022).

Pakistani women's lives are therefore fundamentally shaped by structural and racial inequalities, while the experiences and impacts of having a family member incarcerated are also likely to be unequally distributed amongst this population. These socio-political and economic contexts illustrate why adopting a unidimensional lens, such as gender, to make sense of the social harms which occur, or are exacerbated, by family member imprisonment, does not adequately capture the various dimensions that produce these women's qualitative realities. This is supported by international research, which has documented how the incarceration of a family member alone does not create chronic strain for minoritized communities; rather, it exacerbates existing systemic inequalities and marginalization (Western and Pettit 2010; Patterson *et al.* 2021). This article will therefore apply an intersectional analysis as this framework facilitates inquiry of multiple, overlapping categorizations that operate to shape the distinctive experience of Pakistani women during this critical life event.

Intersectionality as a framework for examining multi-dimensional harms of family member imprisonment

Intersectionality emerged as a form of theory and praxis in the 1960s and 1970s, as Black women scholars and activists in the United States recognized how mainstream feminism, anti-racist movements and unions organizing for workers' rights failed to address the multiple dimensions of oppression which coalesced to shape their experiences and subjugation (Collins and Bilje 2020). The criticisms held were that liberation movements at the time were focused on addressing singular dimensions of oppression, such as either 'race' or gender, and excluded the multi-dimensional experiences of inequality and disadvantage for those groups who were situated at the intersection of these sites of oppression. Black feminist lesbian organizations argued that when 'race' and

gender are disaggregated and contested as two separate categories, there is a propensity for privileged members within those groups, for example, White women and/or Black men, to dominate the discourse and narratives to be constructed that situate themselves and their subjectivities as representative and reflective of the larger group (Taylor 2017). Later, Crenshaw's (1989; 1991) seminal work marked the transition of intersectionality into academia. She argued that this shift was necessitated by 'the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis' and to contest 'the single-axis framework that is dominant in antidiscrimination law and ... feminist theory and antiracist politics' (Crenshaw 1989: 139). Additionally, Crenshaw (1989: 140) claimed that the marginalization of Black women in feminist theory and antiracist politics cannot be resolved by their inclusion in existing analytical frameworks because the 'intersectional experience is greater than [simply] the sum of racism and sexism' and therefore any attempt to conceptualize Black women's subjugation without intersectionality would be inadequate.

Crucially, intersectionality as an analytical framework is not confined to specific categories, social problems or global contexts, but rather it has been a dynamic and expansive theoretical instrument since its inception (Cho *et al.* 2013). In the ensuing decades, intersectionality has been employed as both a conceptual and analytical tool across various contexts and disciplines (Cho *et al.* 2013). Although intersectionality has gained significant momentum across academia, critics have noted that, regarding 'race', there has been little engagement of the framework in a British Criminological context, despite 'intricate entanglements of class, race/ethnicity, gender and generation' which comprise British society (Parmar 2016: 37). Discourse pertaining to 'race' and ethnicity has occurred superficially, and there has been inadequate interrogation or integration of conceptual developments and debates which have occurred in cognate disciplines in recent years (Bosworth *et al.* 2008). This has prompted some criminologists to call for the application of intersectional frameworks to develop critical understandings of how different axes of power, that is, 'race', ethnicity, gender and class, are enmeshed and interact with each other to construct the qualitative experiences of racially minoritized groups (Potter 2015; Parmar 2016). For Pakistani women, whose community have been subjected to criminalization and who find themselves at the nexus of multiple axes of inequality and disadvantage, as outlined in this article, intersectionality offers a pivotal framework to generate insights into their experiences of family member incarceration.

METHODS

This article draws on data from a broader qualitative study that explored Pakistani prisoners' families' experiences of stigma within the context of power and the social structures shaping their lives in England. The study examined how stigma is both experienced and negotiated in everyday interactions with criminal justice institutions and within community settings. The research involved 23 semi-structured interviews with Pakistani individuals aged 18 and over who had experienced the imprisonment of a male family member. Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences across the criminal justice journey—from initial police contact and arrest through to imprisonment and their interactions with the prison estate. These accounts included perceptions of institutional responses and the availability (or absence) of support. To maintain a focused analysis of racialized carceral harm as experienced by UK citizens, the study excluded family members of foreign national prisoners, whose experiences often involve distinct immigration-related challenges.

This article centres on a subset of 13 British Pakistani women whose narratives illuminate the gendered dimensions of stigma, harm and survival work within families affected by imprisonment. Participants were primarily recruited through two gatekeeper organizations based in different

English cities, with additional individuals identified through snowball sampling and social media outreach. Recruitment focused on urban areas across England characterized by significant British Pakistani populations. Although specific locations are not disclosed to preserve anonymity, participants' narratives reflect experiences shaped by racialized surveillance and structural disadvantage within these localities.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face between June 2018 and November 2019, across a range of settings including participants' homes, workplaces, university offices, cafés and libraries. Each session lasted approximately 60 minutes, was audio-recorded with consent, and subsequently transcribed. A thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, involving an iterative process of familiarization, initial coding, development of subthemes, and organization into overarching themes. These themes were then analysed in relation to the theoretical framework underpinning this article.

The researcher adhered to the British Society of Criminology's (2015) ethical guidelines and procedures for the duration of the study and ethical approval was granted by the Faculty of Education, Social Sciences and Law Ethics Committee at the University of Leeds (ref. AREA 17-63). The researcher gained informed consent from research participants prior to their participation in the study. All personal information disclosed during the interviews, including names, locations (towns and cities) and prisons, were anonymized upon transcription to protect the identities of the research participants and eliminate any risk or threats that may arise with exposure. Specific offences were grouped into broader offence-type categories. On some occasions, details surrounding the offence were also omitted, if it was believed that this information could be used to identify participants. Pseudonyms have been used to anonymize the research participant's identity throughout this study, including in this article. Research participants received a gift voucher as a token of appreciation for their participation in the study. Table 1 outlines details of the women who participated in this study, their age range, occupational status and their relationship to the prisoner. During the interviews, most women described having previously encountered the criminal justice estate, primarily in some negative capacity, and this has also been included in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of participant characteristics and prior experience of the criminal justice system.

| Pseudonym | Relationship | Age range | Occupational status | Prior experience of CJS |
|-----------|---------------|-----------|---------------------|-------------------------|
| Khadija | Grandmother | 70+ | Retired | Yes |
| Sara | Mother | 46–50 | Employed | Yes |
| Parveen | Wife | 31–35 | Housewife | Unknown |
| Ambreen | Mother | 41–45 | Employed P/T | Yes |
| Aneesa | Mother-in-Law | 56–60 | Housewife | Yes |
| Salma | Wife | 41–45 | Self-employed P/T | Yes |
| Sadia | Sister | 21–25 | Employed | Yes |
| Summayah | Wife | 31–35 | Employed P/T | Yes |
| Noreen | Wife | 51–55 | Housewife | Yes |
| Faiza | Mother | 46–50 | Housewife | Unknown |
| Naheeda | Mother | 56–60 | Housewife | Yes |
| Jameela | Wife | 36–40 | Housewife | Unknown |
| Mariam | Sister | 21–25 | Employed | Unknown |

DISCUSSION

The accounts provided by the participants of this study demonstrated how, following the incarceration of a family member, the harms experienced by Pakistani women span various social domains, revealing a complex landscape of challenges. As noted by [Comfort et al. \(2016\)](#), the social harms experienced by prisoners' families are interlinked and often function to trigger or exacerbate each other. Likewise, these experiences are entangled and interwoven for Pakistani women. While the accounts of women in this study also aligned with existing research, which has highlighted the pre-existing socio-economic inequality and disadvantage that characterizes prisoners' families' lives ([Arditti 2012](#)), their experiences were also shaped by wider systemic and racial inequalities and racial and ethnic discrimination within the criminal justice system. Consequently, their narratives provide profound insight into the compounded effects of marginalization and systemic oppression.

Aggravated financial and racial inequalities during incarceration

Pakistani households are notably among those most vulnerable to severe economic hardship compared to other communities, a condition that often extends over long periods ([Matejic et al. 2024](#)). This persistent financial strain was a recurring theme among several women who participated in this study, and for some, these conditions were severely exacerbated following the incarceration of a family member. The compounded financial burden intensified existing hardships, leading to significant struggles in their daily lives. One of the most poignant illustrations of this was provided by Jameela, who described how her family's previously precarious financial situation deteriorated after her husband was incarcerated, impacting her and her children:

Since all of this has happened they [the children] can't have anything extra, I can't afford it. I've had to use second-hand clothes, and the school have helped with uniforms and stuff because I just don't have enough [money]. My daughter had a school trip last week and I couldn't afford to send her. On Eid I can't afford to get them new clothes or presents, like they would get before this happened.

This account vividly illustrates how, for some families, incarceration can exacerbate pre-existing economic hardship, causing further material deprivation and leaving them unable to meet basic needs or provide children with educational and social opportunities. It also demonstrates how the imprisonment of a spouse can place significant strain on Pakistani women, hindering their ability to provide adequate care and support for their children.

In addition to these material consequences, the financial strain experienced by some participants was compounded by the costs associated with making visits to the prison and supporting the prisoner during the sentence. A number of women explained that they were unable to provide financial assistance to the prisoner due to the severity of their own circumstances, and instead relied on extended family members for support. Similarly, Ambreen described how travelling to visit her son was financially burdensome, but that she was determined to ensure her other children maintained a relationship with their brother:

Going to visit him is expensive too, getting a train and stuff like that, for me and his sisters, and then once we are there, getting food and everything, it all adds up. But what can you do, he is my son, he is their brother, and we want to see him.

This account reflects wider literature on prisoners' families, particularly the strain on household resources and the added expenditure of 'time, energy, and money' ([Christian 2005: 37](#)) required to maintain contact and relationships during incarceration (see also [Arditti et al. 2004](#)).

For some Pakistani women in this study, these processes were further exacerbated by the discrimination and securitization experienced by their incarcerated relatives. According to the (Lammy Review 2017), racially minoritized prisoners are more likely to face discrimination and disparate treatment at each stage of the criminal justice process, from arrest to sentencing and imprisonment. Asian prisoners, for example, are more likely to receive higher security categorizations than White prisoners for similar offences and to be held in high-security prisons (Lammy 2017). High-security prisons—typically categorized as A and B—are often more geographically dispersed than category C and D prisons. For participants in this study, this sometimes meant travelling further, for longer, and at greater cost to visit family members. Mariam explained how this was challenging for her and her dependent parents when visiting her brother, who had been classified as a high-risk prisoner and transferred to a high-security facility despite being incarcerated for a non-violent offence:

Well... we don't go [to visit him] as much anymore. When he was first sentenced he was in [local prison] and he was there for a few months so we would go to see him every week or every other week at the least—but then they moved him to a different prison and that is about five or six hours away and we have to get a train and two buses so we don't go as much anymore. I have been but I don't take my parents anymore because it's too far for them, to go on public transport, and it's expensive too, getting three train tickets and buses and then food and everything, it costs a fortune.

As a result, Mariam explained that she had restricted visits to her brother and had only travelled to see him once in the last 6 months. Similar experiences were described by other participants, illustrating how women already facing financial insecurity were burdened with excessive costs to maintain family ties with their imprisoned relatives. The cumulative effect of these pressures not only exacerbated existing socio-economic disadvantage but also risked perpetuating cycles of poverty and social exclusion.

Housing instability and its social impact during imprisonment

The exacerbation of economic and material hardship following the incarceration of a family member can have profound repercussions across multiple social domains, further entrenching existing inequalities and processes of marginalization. For some participants in this study, the imprisonment of a husband and the subsequent loss of household income intensified already precarious housing circumstances, contributing to the destabilization of family life. This impact was most pronounced for women in lower-income households or without extended family support, while others with more secure financial or social resources experienced comparatively less disruption. Jameela, for instance, described how her family's financial difficulties, already acute prior to her husband's imprisonment, were severely aggravated by his absence, ultimately necessitating a search for alternative accommodation for herself and her children:

We were struggling financially before my husband was sent down [to prison] ... we were already in arrears, we were behind on rent by about 3 months and then when he got sent to prison, if it was bad already that made it ten times worse... I had to move into a council house because we couldn't afford to rent. It isn't the best but at least we have a roof over our heads.

In her interview, Jameela also described how moving to social housing had been difficult and had caused disruption to her children's lives, as they moved to an unfamiliar neighbourhood, away from their friends and further from their schools, and were withdrawn from classes at the local mosque. A similar experience was shared by Summayah, who explained that she was required to stay in unsuitable accommodation for a number of years during her husband's imprisonment and how this served to disadvantage her children:

I didn't think I would be there that long; I don't know how I survived there that long, just because the rent was cheaper. So there were three children in a two-bedroom flat, and the living room and kitchen are one room. And we lived like that for 3 years and the kids would get frustrated and stressed out, 'mum we can't play, mum I want to do this, I want to do that', and I would say no because we don't have the space, or 'oh can we have this', [and I would say] no because we don't have the space for it. They couldn't play out in the garden because there is a rat hole in the garden and all of these things were adding up.

These accounts illustrate how, for some Pakistani women in this study, relocating to more affordable accommodation following the imprisonment of a family member involved moving to unsuitable or inadequate housing, where access to essential services and the maintenance of social networks became more difficult. Pakistani households are statistically more likely to include a greater number of children than White households (Matejic *et al.* 2024), which may mean that the impact of imprisonment and associated social harms—such as housing disruption—can extend to more individuals within the household. This is evident in Summayah's account, where she emphasizes the limited space for her children to carry out routine activities, potentially hindering their social development and contributing to the intergenerational transmission of inequality and disadvantage. While these testimonies resonate with broader literature on prisoners' families and housing disruption (Light and Campbell 2006; Raikes 2014), the experiences shared by participants in this study also reflect how broader structural and racial inequalities can heighten vulnerability to housing disparity within some Pakistani families in the United Kingdom (Rogaly *et al.* 2021). The diminished household income resulting from a family member's incarceration, therefore, not only compounds existing financial vulnerabilities but can also push families into precarious housing circumstances.

For the women in this study, experiences of housing insecurity were further compounded by racial inequalities embedded in wider social policy. For example, welfare reforms such as the benefit cap and the two-child limit, introduced by the Conservative government in 2013 and 2017, have been found to disproportionately impact racially minoritized groups (Stewart *et al.* 2021). Asian families have been found to be around £728 less well-off annually as a result of cuts to tax benefits (Edmiston *et al.* 2022), and Pakistani women are among those most severely affected by these changes (Woodward 2018). This was reflected in Summayah's account, as she described her decision to move to a more suitable property for her children—despite the higher cost—and how she was financially impacted by cuts to the benefits she received. She explained that she had no choice but to cover the shortfall in her rent by using money from other benefits, which created a deficit that affected other areas of household spending:

Where I am now I went from a £450 a month, to a £650 a month house, because I know it will be beneficial for the kids in the long run. And I knew financially it's going to rinse me out completely, but I've got to budget. And then it got to a point, when they introduced the benefit cap, so before that I was ok, so when they introduced the benefit cap... what they did is, if you had a certain amount of income per week in benefits, anything over that like your housing benefit that comes in gets cut, so it was reduced so then... I was forking out £270 a month from my income support, to cover rent. So the money I was getting from the job centre when I was signing on and job searching, that was going on my rent, it wasn't even going on my own personal things that I needed for the house.

Summayah's account illustrates the complex decisions and constraints faced by some Pakistani women following the imprisonment of a family member. In this instance, she prioritized her children's well-being despite being severely financially constrained by welfare reforms, which impacted her ability to afford basic household necessities. Critically, this narrative also highlights how multiple dimensions of identity—such as 'race', gender and class—interact with structural and institutional inequalities to intensify vulnerability in the aftermath of incarceration.

Intersectional challenges in addressing social and economic harm

Although the majority of women who participated in this study were not active in the labour market—a finding that aligns with broader research on the economic activity of Pakistani women (Clark and Shankley 2020)—some participants were in employment and described how they continued working to alleviate the financial strain experienced following the incarceration of a family member. Salma, for example, explained how she remained in her part-time role after her husband's imprisonment, which had intensified her precarious financial circumstances, and how she was often required to take leave to prioritize the well-being of her five pre-teen children:

I've got a 16-hour plus job that I have to do. And I'm running around with the kids. If one of them is poorly then I have to make arrangements. And there are days when I've had enough. As they've got older I'd say things have got a little bit easier. But it's still really hard—I still have my moments and my bad days.

Salma's account corresponds with wider research in this field, which has found that following the imprisonment of a partner or spouse, women often prioritize the well-being and interests of their children and may reduce their working hours or leave employment entirely, as caregiving responsibilities increase (Arditti et al. 2004; Smith et al. 2007). Other participants in this study explained how, after previously being homemakers, they sought employment to alleviate the financial strain following their husbands' imprisonment and the associated loss of income. This was described by Summayah, who explained that her husband had previously been solely responsible for the household income, and that she was required to seek part-time employment following his imprisonment:

When I wasn't working, I was struggling a lot, mainly because the rent was high, supporting him in prison, paying for the kids' things, trying to keep things ticking over basically... I was always used to him bringing in the money, and then me just dealing with whatever needs to be paid for, so I paid all the bills, he didn't like all that. So it was good in a sense that I had that financial responsibility, that I knew how to budget and what needed to be paid. It was a case of then when you are left with a one-person income, or a lower income on benefits, and [have to] juggle rent and pay for the kids' things, and then squeezing in money for prison visits or for new clothes, because nobody else was supporting him... that pressure, [it] built up.

Summayah's testimony reveals the significant adjustments some women in this study had to make following their partner's incarceration, including balancing financial obligations, managing household duties and providing both emotional and practical support to their children and the incarcerated family member. Her account also illustrates how, in certain cases, Pakistani women may depart from cultural expectations and seek employment to alleviate the compounded financial strain experienced by their families. While these accounts reflect broader research on women affected by the imprisonment of a family member, the convergence of this event with pre-existing socio-economic inequality—shaped by structural and racial inequalities—can intensify the challenges faced by some Pakistani women.

For other participants, opportunities to enter employment were limited by their biographies and migration histories. This was particularly evident among first-generation Pakistani women who were born in Pakistan and had migrated to the United Kingdom earlier in life. Some described challenges related to a lack of qualifications and limited English language proficiency, which impeded their ability to access the labour market. This was exemplified by Noreen, who described the difficulties she encountered following her husband's imprisonment:

It's hard for me to find work now. I don't have any qualifications; I struggle with basic things like reading and writing. I came here when I was nine or ten years old and went to school for a bit, and then got married and had kids, and looking after them and my husband was my whole life, I've never done anything else. Who is going to employ me now? The only jobs that I can get now pay under £5 an hour, it isn't worth it.

Noreen's account underscores the value of intersectionality as an intra-categorical analytical tool (Crenshaw 1991), illuminating the subjectivities within groups of marginalized and disadvantaged women. Her narrative illustrates how, within the broader categorization of Pakistani women, individual experiences are shaped by intersecting systems of oppression beyond gender, 'race', ethnicity and class—including migration history. Noreen's testimony further illustrates how Pakistani women may be vulnerable to exploitation in the labour market, as a result of their disadvantaged position at the interstices of multiple sites of domination. This is consistent with research on racial inequalities in employment, which has found that Pakistani workers are among the most likely to work in the grey economy and to be illegally paid below the minimum wage (Clark and Shankley 2020; Khan 2020). Moreover, Pakistani women's experiences in employment are often unfavourable, with research also indicating that they are among the most likely to receive the lowest pay among women from other ethnic groups (Brynin and Longhi 2015; Clark and Shankley 2020). Crucially, these vulnerabilities were not experienced uniformly; as reflected in women's accounts, factors such as age, education levels, and the availability of familial or community networks shaped their exposure to exploitation and access to employment.

The health implications of family imprisonment and discrimination in the CJS

According to existing research, the multiple social harms that occur as a consequence of familial imprisonment can contribute to poorer health outcomes for affected individuals (Arditti 2012). These include increased levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health-related issues (Braman 2004; Condry 2007). Some women have also reported that existing physical health issues worsened, or new conditions emerged, following the imprisonment of a family member (Condry *et al.* 2016). Similar experiences were described by several participants in this study. Khadija, for example, explained how her psychological and physical health declined following the imprisonment of her grandson, and that she had been prescribed medication to cope with her symptoms:

My health was not great prior to this, but ever since this has happened I've been so unwell. The doctor has diagnosed me with depression, I don't sleep well, and I have pains in my back and stomach.

Interviewer—And has this been since he was sentenced?

Yeah it has—since he has been in prison. My health has not been good for some years, but it has been worse since all of this has happened.

Though this account corresponds with wider discourse on women who experience family member incarceration, there are specific nuances in the experiences of some Pakistani women, shaped by their socio-economic status. For example, Jameela and Sadia disclosed that, in their experience, the financial insecurity that followed the imprisonment of a family member was a key source of anxiety and contributed to a decline in their physical and mental health. Moreover, wider research has found that Pakistani women face persistent health inequalities, with rates consistently higher than those of White British women (Bécares 2013). These disparities, partially explained by racial discrimination and socio-economic disadvantage, have remained largely unchanged over the past 25 years (Stopforth *et al.* 2021). The inference that can be drawn from these accounts is that the

health implications of family member incarceration, for some Pakistani women, are tied to—and potentially aggravated by—existing socio-economic inequalities rooted in racial and ethnic disparities.

Beyond inequalities in broader social contexts, participants also described how their mental, emotional and physical health was affected by discrimination within the criminal justice and penal systems. Several women reported experiencing anxiety and distress related to the treatment of their incarcerated family member, particularly when the prisoner had been sanctioned under the Incentives and Earned Privileges (IEP) scheme. The IEP scheme is designed to regulate prisoners' behaviour through a system of rewards and punishments. Sanctions can include restrictions on 'association' periods—when prisoners are allowed out of their cells and can access communal telephones—as well as limitations on visitation, including closed visits conducted under strict supervision or through glass barriers. Although these sanctions are formally directed at prisoners following misconduct, they can impede the maintenance of family contact and have a significant emotional impact on relatives.

This was exemplified by Naheeda, who explained that her son had been unable to call her for several days following a disciplinary incident. As a result of the sanction, he had limited time outside his cell and had to prioritize calls to other family members, such as his daughter. Naheeda described the experience as intensely distressing:

Obviously for a mother, I get so worried and think what has happened, is he OK, is he alive. I always start to think the worst because whenever he doesn't call it's because something bad has happened, and I get so worried sick. I can't eat or sleep, I can't even think properly.

Likewise, Faiza's son had been placed on basic status under the IEP scheme and was subsequently restricted to closed visits. She explained how the securitized nature of this setting discouraged her from visiting:

The last time I've seen him was in December, because he has been on basic. He doesn't want me to go when he is on basic. He is supposed to be booking visit for me, it's been 3 months, and I am going to forget what he looks like...

Other participants also noted that they had been unable to visit their imprisoned relatives due to similar restrictions. Scholars of prisoners' families have previously identified how the (mis)treatment of offenders and the deprivation of their rights can indirectly contribute to the 'negative othering' of their families (Condry *et al.* 2016). The (Lammy Review 2017) further reported that men from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds were more likely than White prisoners to report being victimized and unfairly treated under the IEP scheme. These accounts, therefore, illustrate how the discriminatory treatment of racially minoritized prisoners can also harm women and families from those communities. While Naheeda's account demonstrates the emotional toll this can take, Faiza's experience highlights how such policies can disrupt opportunities for maintaining meaningful contact with incarcerated loved ones.

Political and historical contexts that shape the social positioning of Pakistani women also serve to increase psychological harm during a relative's incarceration. Several women expressed anxiety and fear regarding the well-being of their imprisoned family member, particularly in an environment they understood to be discriminatory and hostile toward Pakistani and Muslim prisoners. These perceptions were often informed by prior experiences of racism in interactions with criminal justice actors and the broader securitization and criminalization of Muslim communities in recent times. In one example, Sadia explained that her mother became fearful when her son was arrested, recalling a negative encounter with the police over two decades earlier:

Because of that incident with my uncle over 20 years ago, it shaped a very negative perception of the police in my mum's eyes, and I guess the rest of us too as a family. The police had been very aggressive and made racist remarks to my uncle and my mum's family at that time. And I think that caused her to be alarmed when she found out her son was arrested, it kind of brought all of that back for her and she was worried about how they would be with him.

This account exemplifies how personal memories of racism are entangled with a wider history of contentious relations between Pakistani communities and criminal justice institutions in England and Wales. Decades of over-policing in Pakistani neighbourhoods, racial profiling and discriminatory practices, including disproportionate stop-and-search tactics and aggressive policing during periods of racial tension, have contributed to a deep-seated sense of mistrust and alienation (Sharp and Atherton 2007; Bagguley and Hussain 2008). This historic backdrop shaped how many participants perceived their relatives' imprisonment within a system they viewed as structurally biased against their community, reinforcing their fears and anxieties about the treatment of their loved ones.

A pattern of negative encounters with criminal justice actors emerged across multiple interviews. Most participants described such experiences at some stage in their lives (see Table 1), including earlier instances of familial imprisonment, hostile interactions with police officers—such as harassment and the use of excessive force during arrests—and perceived discrimination by members of the judiciary. While institutional racism within the criminal justice system has been widely documented (Shankley and Williams 2020), and the (Lammy Review 2017) reported that racially minoritized prisoners are more likely to experience discrimination at every stage of the process, these testimonies illustrate how such systemic bias can also shape the lived experiences of some Pakistani women, serving as a source of anxiety and fear. Although these narratives align with existing scholarship on the emotional and psychological harm experienced by prisoners' families (Condry *et al.* 2016), they also demonstrate how overlapping characteristics—such as gender, 'race', ethnicity and faith—may interact to disproportionately harm Pakistani women in these circumstances.

Navigating familial imprisonment: active coping and constrained agency

While participants' accounts vividly illustrate the structural constraints and social harms they faced, they also reveal that women were not merely passive subjects left to endure the consequences of familial imprisonment. Instead, many women demonstrated ingenuity and determination in actively navigating these challenges and safeguarding their families' well-being. Sumaiyah, for example, took the initiative to relocate her family to alternative accommodation, prioritizing her children's safety and emotional stability amidst upheaval. Jameela adopted adaptive strategies to mitigate financial strain, sourcing second-hand clothing and negotiating practical support from her children's school to ensure their basic needs were met. Ambreen, despite significant financial and logistical obstacles, strategically planned and budgeted to maintain regular contact between her children and their imprisoned brother, underscoring her resolve to preserve familial bonds in the face of systemic barriers. Such accounts correspond with the symbiotic nature of familial imprisonment (Condry and Minson 2021), as women actively negotiate and respond to the effects of incarceration, even within the constraints of structural inequality.

Other participants also turned to entrepreneurial activities as a means of navigating economic precarity. Noreen, for instance, described starting a home-based food business to generate income and sustain her household during her husband's imprisonment:

I started making food like kebabs and samosas and freezing them and then I would sell them to people or even some businesses would buy them and I made some money that way, to get by and to pay for things.

These narratives challenge the assumption that carceral harm is passively endured by families, instead illuminating the agency women exercise in navigating and responding to these conditions. Such everyday acts of survival—though shaped by necessity rather than empowerment—resonate with wider scholarship that foregrounds the often-overlooked political dimensions of minority women's coping strategies in contexts of austerity and marginalization (see [Bassel and Emejulu 2017](#)). In this study, these strategies were not always visible or formally recognized, but they were crucial to how women managed the intersecting pressures of imprisonment, inequality and care.

Besides these individual coping strategies, most of the women in this study had been accessing some level of support through third-sector charities established to support racially minoritized families affected by imprisonment. These organizations, while crucial, were often small, under-resourced and operating in precarious funding environments. Salma, particularly, described receiving support from St Giles Trust, which provided counselling and social support for her children to help them process their father's imprisonment. She also noted that her children's school arranged transportation and other practical assistance to stabilize their daily routines. While such interventions were vital for some, other women faced barriers to accessing similar support due to language, cultural differences and historic mistrust of statutory services. This reflects findings from [Abass et al. \(2016\)](#), who argue that family support systems often fail to address the specific needs of racially minoritized communities, emphasizing the need for culturally competent and accessible services.

These accounts collectively illuminate how British Pakistani women navigate the overlapping oppressions of race, gender and class while managing the profound disruptions caused by familial imprisonment. Their resourcefulness underscores the agency embedded in everyday practices of survival and care, even as such agency is constrained by structural inequalities and institutional neglect. Recognizing these dynamics is critical for understanding how imprisonment can extend its reach into the intimate and social worlds of racially minoritized families, compounding disadvantage and reproducing cycles of harm across generations.

CONCLUSION

This article foregrounds the multidimensional subjectivities of Pakistani women impacted by family member incarceration, offering a critical lens on how overlapping systems of oppression shape lived experience. It demonstrates that incarceration is not a discrete event but a socially embedded process that reverberates through families, disproportionately affecting those already positioned at the margins. For Pakistani women, these effects are compounded by structural inequalities rooted in racialization, gendered expectations and class-based disadvantage. The convergence of these forces produces distinctively complex forms of harm, which are intensified by the discriminatory treatment of Muslim prisoners and the securitization of their identities within the prison estate.

By attending to intra-categorical variation, this study challenges homogenizing narratives and highlights the need to account for differences within marginalized groups. The experiences of first-generation women, for instance, reveal how language barriers, limited access to formal education and restricted social capital exacerbate the disruptions caused by incarceration. These findings underscore the importance of intersectional analysis in capturing the multiplicative nature of subjugation and the uneven distribution of harm.

The study also contributes to broader debates on racialized punishment and the social consequences of incarceration. It calls for further research into the experiences of racially minoritized families in the United Kingdom, particularly in light of their overrepresentation in the prison system and the cumulative impacts of criminalization. Expansive theoretical approaches—grounded in intersectionality, critical race theory and feminist scholarship—are essential for unpacking the nuanced realities of these communities and resisting reductive framings.

Ultimately, this work not only enriches academic discourse but also carries implications for policy and practice. Recognizing the complexity of lived experience is vital for developing inclusive interventions that address the specific needs of racially minoritized women and families. Such efforts must move beyond surface-level engagement to confront the structural conditions that produce and sustain inequality, ensuring that responses to incarceration are both ethically grounded and socially transformative.

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