



Navigating Law, Custom, and Stigma: The Socio-Cultural Resilience of Balinese Women Prisoners Convicted of Narcotics Offenses

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ABSTRACT

Women prisoners often face psychological, social, and cultural challenges that may affect their capacity to adapt to imprisonment and prepare for social reintegration. In Bali, cultural values provide an important context for understanding how women prisoners interpret adversity and develop resilience. This study explores how cultural values are internalized through correctional education and how this process relates to resilience among women prisoners involved in narcotics cases. A qualitative case study was conducted with 15 women prisoners at the Class IIA Kerobokan Women's Correctional Institution. Data were collected through repeated in-depth interviews, moderate participant observation, and source triangulation involving medical personnel and customary village representatives. The data were analyzed thematically using MAXQDA following Braun and Clarke's procedures. The findings indicate that correctional education provides an ecological context for religious practice, psychological support, vocational activities, and social interaction, enabling participants to develop self-acceptance, meaning, hope, and preparation for reintegration. Karmaphala, reported by 14 of 15 participants, emerged as a prominent cultural framework for interpreting imprisonment as a consequence of past actions, while "kudiang men" phrase supported acceptance of circumstances that could not be immediately changed. Resilience therefore emerged as a dynamic process of navigating and negotiating cultural, personal, institutional, and social resources.

Keywords: Balinese women prisoners; Customary law; Narcotics offenses; Social stigma; Socio-cultural resilience.

INTRODUCTION

Women's imprisonment cannot be understood solely as a consequence of criminal conviction or institutional confinement. For women, incarceration often intersects with family separation, caregiving responsibilities, previous trauma, substance-use histories, health vulnerabilities, social relationships, and concerns about returning to family and community life. Recent research has emphasized that women prisoners have distinctive psychological and social needs, including access to substance-use treatment, health services, counselling, social support, training, and meaningful interpersonal relationships (Hidayati et al., 2023; Bright et al., 2023; Ang et al., 2025). These needs are particularly important because correctional systems have historically

been developed around institutional models that may not adequately respond to women's gender-specific experiences and circumstances (Salisbury & Crawford, 2025). Thus, the experience of imprisonment among women needs to be examined not only in terms of individual psychological adjustment but also through the institutional, relational, cultural, and legal environments in which that adjustment takes place.

The issue becomes more complex among women convicted of narcotics offenses because imprisonment may occur alongside substance-use-related vulnerabilities. A systematic review of substance use disorders among prisoners found that drug use disorders were highly prevalent among incarcerated populations, with a pooled prevalence of approximately 51% among women prisoners in the studies included in the review (Fazel et al., 2017). Women with substance-use histories may experience withdrawal, craving, mental-health difficulties, trauma-related vulnerabilities, and challenges in maintaining recovery during and after incarceration. Research on women leaving prison with substance-use disorders further indicates that post-release needs are connected not only to substance-use treatment but also to mental health, social relationships, and continuity of support during community reintegration (Edwards et al., 2021). Consequently, the correctional experience of women with narcotics-related convictions involves an interaction between institutional restrictions, substance-related vulnerability, interpersonal relationships, and future reintegration.

The social environment within prison is also consequential. Prisoners depend on relationships with family members, peers, prison staff, health professionals, and other institutional resources while their freedom to independently obtain support is substantially restricted. A systematic review of 32 studies involving 10,613 prisoners found that social support was generally associated with fewer symptoms of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress, whereas loneliness was associated with poorer mental-health outcomes (Machado et al., 2024). For women prisoners, therefore, relationships should not be regarded merely as background circumstances. Family contact, peer relationships, counselling, health services, and prison-based activities can become resources through which women manage stress, maintain social identity, and prepare for reintegration. At the same time, interpersonal relationships may also become sources of conflict, jealousy, exclusion, or emotional pressure. The value of a social resource consequently depends on its accessibility, relational quality, and meaning for the individual rather than simply on its presence within the environment.

These dynamics become particularly significant when imprisonment intersects with culture and social belonging. In Bali, individual identity is closely connected to family relationships, community membership, religious life, and customary institutions. For women who have been convicted of criminal offenses, returning to community life may therefore involve more than completing a state-imposed sentence. It may also involve concerns about family reputation, social acceptance, customary obligations, and the possibility of sanctions or exclusion within customary communities. A recent study found that formerly incarcerated Balinese women experienced difficulties in social reintegration and that stigma could be reinforced through patriarchal family and traditional socio-cultural structures. The study also highlighted the importance of government institutions, customary institutions, and community-based support in facilitating the return of formerly incarcerated women to social life (Narawati et al., 2025).

The findings of Narawati et al. (2025) are important for understanding the socio-cultural consequences of imprisonment in Bali, but they also leave an important analytical space for further investigation. Their study focused on three formerly incarcerated Balinese women and examined the strategies they employed after imprisonment to confront social stigma and pursue reintegration. The present study addresses a different stage and population: women who were still serving their sentences in a correctional institution. This distinction is important because negotiation with law, institutional authority, family relationships, stigma, and customary expectations does not begin only after release. It can already take place during imprisonment as women anticipate their return to family and community life. The present study therefore shifts attention from strategies for confronting stigma after release toward the processes through which women prisoners navigate and negotiate legal-institutional and socio-cultural resources while still incarcerated.

To explain this process, this study draws primarily on Ungar's Social Ecological Resilience Theory (SERT). Unlike approaches that conceptualize resilience predominantly as an internal personal capacity, SERT understands resilience as a process through which individuals navigate toward psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources and negotiate for those resources to become available and meaningful within their particular contexts (Ungar, 2010, 2011, 2012). The theory therefore places particular emphasis on the relationship between individuals and their social ecologies. Resilience is not simply a matter of possessing positive personal characteristics; it also depends on whether meaningful resources exist, whether individuals can access them, and whether those resources are experienced in culturally meaningful ways (Ungar, 2011, 2012). This

perspective is particularly relevant to imprisonment because prisoners operate within an environment in which access to health care, communication, social relationships, daily activities, and institutional services is regulated by correctional structures.

The narcotics context further strengthens the relevance of this perspective. In the present study, participants experienced layered pressures that included withdrawal symptoms, craving, guilt toward family, separation from children or parents, anxiety, boredom, interpersonal tension, and concerns about stigma and reintegration. These pressures did not occur independently. Rather, they interacted with participants' social positions as women, mothers, wives, daughters, and members of Balinese family and customary communities. Coping responses consequently involved not only individual emotional regulation but also the activation of external resources, including prison health services, counselling, family communication, peer relationships, vocational activities, and culturally meaningful beliefs such as Karmaphala and kudiang men. This pattern is consistent with the broader literature showing that women prisoners benefit from interventions and environments that address psychological, relational, social, and gender-specific needs rather than focusing exclusively on individual symptoms (Hidayati et al., 2023; Bright et al., 2023; Ang et al., 2025).

The present study consequently addresses two related research questions: (1) How do Balinese women prisoners convicted of narcotics offenses navigate and negotiate legal, institutional, social, and customary resources while experiencing imprisonment and anticipating reintegration?; and (2) How do these processes constitute forms of socio-cultural resilience in the context of stigma and customary expectations? These questions position resilience as an interactional and contextual process rather than as a fixed psychological attribute. They also enable the study to examine law and culture not as separate analytical domains but as intersecting environments that shape the availability, accessibility, and meaning of resources for women prisoners.

METHODS

Methodologically, this study employed a qualitative case study design within a social constructivist paradigm. The participants were 15 Balinese women prisoners convicted of narcotics offenses and serving sentences at the Class IIA Women's Prison in Kerobokan, Bali. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and moderate participant observation,

with source triangulation involving relevant prison personnel and customary-community informants. The data were analyzed thematically through inductive and deductive processes, enabling recurring patterns of risk, protective resources, coping, cultural meaning, and navigation and negotiation to be identified across participants. A qualitative case study is appropriate for examining such a phenomenon because the study seeks to understand the meanings and interactions surrounding resilience within a bounded institutional and cultural context rather than to produce statistical generalizations (Yin, 2018). Through this approach, the study seeks to contribute to the law-and-culture literature by demonstrating how Balinese women prisoners experience resilience at the intersection of correctional law, customary expectations, stigma, gender, and social reintegration.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Socio-Cultural Pressures in the Experience of Balinese Women Prisoners

The findings indicate that the experience of imprisonment among Balinese women convicted of narcotics offenses cannot be understood solely in terms of criminal punishment, substance-use problems, or adjustment to the correctional institution. For the 15 participants in this study, imprisonment was embedded in a wider socio-cultural environment involving family relationships, community expectations, customary obligations, gendered roles, social status, and anticipated stigma after release. These dimensions interacted with physical and psychological pressures associated with narcotics use and incarceration, including withdrawal symptoms, craving, guilt, separation from children and parents, anxiety, boredom, and uncertainty about the future. The research findings therefore indicate that resilience developed through the interaction between individual capacities and the availability of ecological resources rather than as a fixed personal characteristic.

This resource ambivalence was particularly visible in the correctional environment. Relationships with fellow prisoners could provide emotional safety and a sense of belonging, but seniority and interpersonal jealousy could also become sources of stress. Similarly, correctional activities could provide meaningful occupation and new skills, while repetitive activities could contribute to boredom. Health personnel could provide a sense of nurturing and psychological safety, whereas limited staff availability could restrict individualized support. Thus, the mere

existence of a resource did not automatically make it protective. Its protective function depended on accessibility, relational quality, personal relevance, and cultural meaning.

This finding supports Ungar's (2012) proposition that resilience should be understood through the relationship between individuals and their social ecologies. In this context, the women were not simply adapting to an environment imposed upon them. They were continuously interpreting their circumstances, selecting available resources, maintaining particular relationships, and adjusting their responses to changing demands. Resilience therefore emerged through an ongoing process of navigation and negotiation between the individual and her social environment.

2. Law, Custom, and the Negotiation of Social Reintegration

One of the most distinctive findings concerned the interaction between the formal criminal justice system and the customary social order in Bali. For several participants, completion of a prison sentence did not necessarily mean that all consequences of the offense would end. Some participants anticipated additional customary obligations in their villages, including *pararem*-based sanctions, ritual obligations, and customary fines. The research identified customary sanctions as an external risk factor because they generated anxiety and uncertainty concerning the participants' ability to return to their communities.

The significance of this finding lies in the distinction between punishment and reintegration. Formal imprisonment constitutes a state-administered legal response to an offense, whereas customary sanctions operate within a different social and cultural system. This finding is consistent with SERT's emphasis on the culturally meaningful availability of resources. A resource is useful only when it can actually be accessed and experienced as meaningful by the individual (Ungar, 2010, 2012). In the present study, the community itself represented an important ecological resource because returning to one's village involved social identity, family relationships, belonging, and everyday participation. Consequently, the participants' responses to customary sanctions need to be understood within the broader goal of social reintegration rather than solely as responses to punishment.

At the same time, the findings do not support the assumption that customary communities uniformly reject women with criminal convictions. The research instead demonstrates variation in participants' experiences and expectations. Some participants anticipated sanctions and social embarrassment, while others relied on family members, peers, or community recognition as

sources of support. This distinction is important because culture should not be treated as inherently protective or inherently harmful. Its effect depends on how cultural norms and institutions are experienced, interpreted, and negotiated by particular individuals in particular social positions.

3. Gender, Caste, and Family Belonging.

The interaction between gender and social status became particularly visible in the experiences of participants whose family and marital histories were associated with caste or *wangsa*. The findings suggest that caste was not experienced as an isolated social category. Rather, it intersected with gender, marriage, family authority, social belonging, and expectations concerning women's behavior. These experiences suggest that caste becomes psychologically and socially consequential through relationships and institutions, particularly family and marriage. The issue is therefore not simply whether an individual belongs to a particular caste, but how caste is enacted through expectations concerning marriage, family loyalty, social identity, and community membership. Previous research on Balinese women has similarly documented that caste and inter-caste marriage may intersect with gendered expectations, family relationships, and women's social positions (Cahyaningtyas, 2016; Mahardini & Tobing, 2017; Wagiswari & Valentina, 2025).

From a gender-responsive perspective, these findings are also consistent with the argument that women's experiences in correctional settings are shaped by relational and caregiving roles (Bloom et al., 2003; Covington & Bloom, 2006). The participants did not experience imprisonment simply as individuals who had violated criminal law. They experienced it as mothers, wives, daughters, partners, and members of customary communities. Consequently, guilt and anxiety were frequently directed toward children, parents, spouses, and family reputation rather than only toward the consequences of the criminal sentence.

This gendered dimension was also visible in decisions concerning family contact. Weni, for example, avoided video calls or visits involving her children because she believed that direct exposure to her imprisonment could affect their psychological well-being and expose them to stigma. This behavior illustrates an important paradox: family relationships were simultaneously a source of emotional support and a source of concern because the participants were also attempting to protect their children's social and emotional position. The resulting coping process was therefore relational rather than purely individual.

4. Stigma as an Ecological Barrier to Reintegration

Stigma emerged as another important factor shaping participants' perceptions of their future. Participants expressed concerns about being judged by neighbors, family members, customary communities, or potential social contacts after release. For some women, the anticipated stigma was associated with the offense itself; for others, it was connected to their gender, family status, previous relationships, or perceived failure to fulfill expected social roles.

The concern about stigma was not limited to the period following release. It was already psychologically present during imprisonment. Participants anticipated questions from neighbors, changes in family relationships, difficulties in employment, and possible rejection from their communities. Thus, reintegration was not a single event occurring at the prison gate. It was an anticipated process that influenced emotional regulation, decision making, and coping while participants were still incarcerated.

This finding is consistent with research showing that social support and social contact are important in prisoners' mental health and reintegration processes. A systematic review by Machado et al. (2024) found that social contacts were generally associated with better mental-health outcomes among prisoners, while concerns about loneliness and social disconnection were associated with poorer psychological outcomes. Research specifically concerning formerly incarcerated Balinese women has also documented the significance of social stigma, family relationships, and community acceptance in the reintegration process (Narawati et al., 2025).

The present study extends this literature by showing that anticipated stigma can operate as an ecological barrier before release. In SERT terms, stigma matters not only because it may generate negative emotions but because it can potentially restrict access to meaningful resources. If a woman expects rejection from her family, village, workplace, or customary community, she may perceive fewer viable pathways for rebuilding her social identity. The psychological burden of stigma therefore becomes intertwined with the practical problem of accessing social resources.

At the same time, the participants' responses demonstrate that stigma did not completely determine their future orientation. Several participants maintained hope of returning to their families, working, establishing new livelihoods, or participating again in community life. Hope therefore functioned as an internal resource that allowed participants to imagine a social identity beyond that of a prisoner. In SERT, this process can be interpreted as an interaction between internal agency and external ecological possibilities.

5. Cultural Meaning-Making as a Resource for Resilience

A central finding across the participants was the importance of culturally meaningful interpretations of adversity. Fourteen of the 15 participants referred to *Karmaphala* as a way of understanding their imprisonment and present suffering. They interpreted the consequences of their actions within a moral and spiritual framework, often viewing imprisonment as an opportunity to accept responsibility, experience the consequences of past actions, and improve themselves.

Another recurring expression was *kudiang men*, broadly conveying an acceptance-oriented attitude of “what else can be done?” In the participants' narratives, this expression did not necessarily represent resignation. Rather, it could function as a cognitive strategy for reducing repetitive rumination and redirecting attention toward what could still be controlled. The research identifies *Karmaphala* and *kudiang men* as important internal protective resources. These findings are important because they demonstrate that cultural beliefs can provide resources that are not readily captured by individual psychological models. The participants did not rely exclusively on techniques such as cognitive restructuring or emotion regulation in a formal psychological sense. They drew upon concepts that already existed within their cultural and spiritual worlds. This corresponds closely with Ungar's emphasis on cultural meaningfulness in resilience. Resources become more usable when they are congruent with the individual's cultural framework and lived experience (Ungar, 2011, 2012).

Nevertheless, *Karmaphala* should not be interpreted as universally protective. The same cultural and moral framework could also intensify guilt or concern about family and community judgment. Similarly, customary obligations could provide a pathway to reintegration for some participants while generating anxiety and shame for others. The findings therefore support a contextual rather than essentialist understanding of culture: cultural meanings may function simultaneously as resources and sources of pressure.

6. Negotiating Resources within the Correctional Ecology

The participants' socio-cultural resilience was also constructed through their relationships within LPP Kelas IIA Kerobokan. The correctional institution was not experienced exclusively as a restrictive environment. It also provided resources that participants could actively navigate,

including health services, counseling, vocational training, peer relationships, and opportunities for family communication.

Health services were particularly important because all participants experienced physical or psychological consequences associated with narcotics use, including withdrawal symptoms and, in several cases, migraine, dysmenorrhea, reproductive-health problems, or other physical complaints. Participants actively visited the prison clinic, requested medication, and sought counseling. Thus, accessing health services represented a form of problem-focused coping and ecological navigation.

Peer relationships were similarly important. Several participants described fellow prisoners as sources of emotional validation or even as a “replacement family.” Antari, for example, developed relationships with fellow prisoners whom she experienced as siblings when family visits were unavailable. The research identifies healthy peer relationships as an important protective factor, while also documenting that peer relationships could become sources of risk through jealousy and seniority. The role of correctional staff was also significant. The participants described a *sense of nurturing* from health personnel, which provided a feeling of safety and emotional containment. Such experiences illustrate that institutional relationships can become psychologically meaningful resources when women perceive staff interactions as responsive and supportive.

Vocational activities represented another important resource. For participants such as Indra, training in making bags provided an alternative orientation toward future work. For Sunerti, cooking and flower-arranging activities provided meaningful occupation while helping her manage boredom and craving. These activities therefore had more than an immediate behavioral function. They could also contribute to reconstructing a future-oriented identity beyond the identity of a prisoner. This finding is consistent with research emphasizing the importance of health services, psychological support, training, empathy, and social support for women in prison (Hidayati et al., 2023). Systematic reviews have also indicated that prison-based interventions addressing psychological and social needs can improve aspects of women's well-being (Ang et al., 2025). From the SERT perspective, however, the important point is not simply that these programs exist. Their contribution to resilience depends on whether participants can access them and whether the resources are experienced as relevant and meaningful.

7. An Integrative Model of Law, Custom, Gender, and Resilience

The findings can be synthesized into an ecological process in which legal involvement, gendered expectations, customary norms, and stigma interact to produce vulnerability, while individual agency and ecological resources facilitate adaptation and reintegration. At the first level, narcotics involvement and imprisonment generated physical and psychological stressors, including withdrawal, craving, anxiety, guilt, separation from family, and uncertainty regarding the future. At the second level, these stressors interacted with social and cultural conditions. For some participants, these included customary sanctions, concerns about community gossip, family expectations, caste-related family conflict, marital disruption, and worries about social status. At the third level, participants responded through navigation and negotiation. They sought medical care, counseling, peer support, family communication, vocational activities, spiritual practices, and culturally meaningful interpretations of their circumstances. These strategies were not always adaptive. Some participants demonstrated *acting out*, including fighting or hitting prison walls, particularly when emotional-regulation resources were insufficient. However, adaptive and maladaptive responses could coexist within the same individual, reinforcing the view that resilience is dynamic rather than a stable behavioral characteristic.

At the fourth level, successful navigation of resources contributed to the development or maintenance of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual resilience. These forms of resilience were subsequently expressed through socio-cultural processes, particularly the preservation or reconstruction of social belonging and preparation for reintegration. Overall, the findings suggest that socio-cultural resilience among Balinese women prisoners is best understood as a dynamic process of maintaining or reconstructing social belonging under conditions of legal punishment, cultural expectations, gendered responsibilities, and stigma. This process requires both individual agency and an environment that provides accessible, culturally meaningful, and socially legitimate resources. Such an interpretation reinforces the central contribution of SERT: resilience is not simply something an individual possesses, but something that is continually constructed through the interaction between people and the social ecologies in which they live.

CONCLUSIONS

This study shows that the resilience of Balinese women prisoners convicted of narcotics offenses is not merely an individual psychological capacity, but a dynamic process shaped by the interaction between personal vulnerabilities, available resources, and socio-cultural conditions. Withdrawal symptoms, craving, anxiety, guilt, family separation, stigma, prison relationships, customary obligations, and concerns about social reintegration constitute interconnected sources of adversity.

Participants responded to these pressures by navigating and utilizing available resources, including health services, counseling, vocational programs, family contact, peer support, and culturally meaningful beliefs. In line with Ungar's social ecological perspective, resilience emerged not only from the women's capacity to seek resources, but also from their ability to negotiate and experience these resources in ways that were meaningful within their social and cultural context.

The findings further demonstrate resilience across physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual domains. In the Balinese context, these processes were strongly shaped by *Karmaphala*, *kudiang men*, family relationships, customary structures, caste-related social positioning, and anticipated stigma. These socio-cultural elements should not be treated as a separate domain of resilience, but as the ecological context that shapes how resilience is understood, enacted, and sustained.

Overall, the study highlights that resilience among Balinese women prisoners is a process of managing adversity, accessing resources, reconstructing meaning, and preparing for social reintegration. Therefore, correctional interventions should address not only individual psychological and substance-related needs, but also stigma, family relationships, cultural values, and the social conditions that influence women's opportunities to rebuild their lives after imprisonment.

Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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