

## **RESURGENCE OF HOPE THROUGH FASHION EDUCATION IN PRISONS OF INDIA POST-PANDEMIC**

### **AUTHORS**

Bela Gupta, Pearl Academy, India

Antonio Maurizio Grioli, Pearl Academy, India

### **KEYWORDS**

Correctional behavior, Empowerment, Impact of fashion education during and post-covid, Prison as a community, Psychological effects of lockdown, Skill development

### **ABSTRACT**

This research project explores the transformative impact of fashion education within the confines of Tihar Central Jail 6, Asia's largest prison complex in India, especially during and post the COVID-19 pandemic. The fashion education program, initiated in 2017, was designed as a need-based intervention to address the underlying causes of crime, such as illiteracy, lack of livelihood skills, deprived backgrounds, abuse, and addiction. The program aimed to empower incarcerated women economically and socially, boost self-worth and self-esteem, facilitate rehabilitation, and reduce recidivism rates. To date, nine batches of women inmates have successfully completed the program. This paper will focus on several key aspects:

#### **(a) Psychological Effects of Lockdown During COVID-19 Pandemic:**

Examine the psychological impact of lockdown on inmates who were already pursuing the fashion education program in prison.

Investigate how the abrupt suspension of family visits and the restrictions on activities affected the mental well-being of the incarcerated women.

Explore the challenges of implementing social distancing measures within the prison population.

#### **(b) Impact of Fashion Education During and Post-COVID:**

Discuss how the fashion education program served as a coping mechanism for inmates during the COVID-19 pandemic, helping them overcome distress and anxiety.

Highlight the role of creative expression and skill development in fostering resilience among incarcerated women.

Share insights into how the program contributed to creating a sense of purpose and hope, especially during challenging times.

(c) Case Studies on the Impact of Training:

Present case studies that demonstrate the tangible benefits of fashion education, including increased income, measurable skill enhancement, and reduced stress levels among participants.

Showcase real-life stories of inmates who have experienced a revival of hope and a transformed perspective on life both within and outside the prison walls.

Analyze the impact of the program in reducing recidivism rates and helping former inmates reintegrate into society successfully.

(d) Impact of Fashion Education on Other Beneficiaries:

Discuss how the fashion education program may have influenced the families and communities of the incarcerated women.

Explore the broader societal implications of providing skill development and empowerment opportunities to prisoners.

Highlight the potential for similar initiatives to bring about positive change in correctional systems and beyond.

This paper sheds light on the remarkable potential of fashion education as a tool for rehabilitation, empowerment, and the resurgence of hope among incarcerated women, especially in the face of unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

This research paper explores the transformative impact of fashion education within the confines of Tihar Central Jail 6, Asia's largest prison complex in India, especially during and post the COVID-19 pandemic. The fashion education program, initiated in 2017, was designed as a need-based intervention to address the underlying causes of crime, such as illiteracy, lack of livelihood skills, deprived backgrounds, abuse, and addiction. The program aimed to empower incarcerated women economically and socially, boost self-worth and self-esteem, facilitate rehabilitation, and reduce recidivism rates. To date, fourteen batches of women inmates have successfully completed the program.

The objective of the paper is to examine the psychological impact of lockdown during pandemic on inmates who were pursuing fashion program in prison. It would further discuss how the program served as a coping mechanism for inmates during the COVID-19 pandemic, helping them overcome distress and anxiety through few case studies that demonstrate the tangible benefits of this program including increased income, measurable skill enhancement, and reduced stress levels among participants. It would further highlight how this program have influenced the families and communities of the incarcerated women.

Visits were made several times in the women's prison to study the impact fashion education among prisoners post pandemic. After conducting interviews with prison authorities and inmates, we got some real insights and stories that helped us to understand the real value of fashion education in their life. It was discovered that inmates were experiencing extreme anxiety symptoms during covid 19 pandemic, which was associated with their economic problems, concern about loneliness, fear, anxiety and depression amongst them. Phone calls were prohibited and no visitors were allowed. Hence, they suffered from extreme depression.

Eventually most of the Indian inmates were sent back to their respective families according to special orders of the court so that they could maintain social distancing. The period turned as a golden period for those who went back home and the time period for which they stayed home was deducted from their imprisonment period. After 2022 when the inmates had to return back after almost 2 years, it was discovered that they were more stressful and depressed as they got the hope of staying with their families.

This was the time when fashion education held them and lifted up from the grief and suffering that they were experiencing. This program already held some inmates who couldn't go back to their houses due to country borders.

We would like to share a few lines from the diary of one of the inmate couldn't travel back home.

She call inmates of Tihar jail as Tiharis. Who mends the broken heart of Tiharis? You give us the beam of light in the darkest days of our lives. Everyday when the trainer open the doors of the fashion lab she says " you open the doors of hope in the lives of Tiharis.' she further says when you tell us to join the pieces of cloth , you tell us to join the pieces of broken hearts. You not only teach us to mend clothes but also to mend the pieces of heart. This clearly shows that the fashion education has an important meaning in their lives.

Inmates always expressed their desire to earn increased income and their training time as they wanted to learn much more. They feel at ease during training, and arguments, fights, and other unacceptable behavior has been reduced as their involvement in the creative work in lab has progressed. The inmates tend to spend much less time in wards where fights generally took place, said one inmate. They are regularly counselled during classes to help and care for their peer in the learning process so that once they are out of prison they are more sensitive to people around them. It is just a phase that would pass and they need to prepare themselves for a better life outside prison. They should take it as an opportunity to develop skills.

Batch	Year	Enrolled	Released	Return cases to prison	Present In prison	Working in production lab in prison	Released cases working outside
1	2017	18	13	0	5	2	6
2	2017	28	16	0	12	5	8
3	2018	26	8	0	18	6	4
4	2018	26	12	0	14	6	10
5	2019	32	4	2	28	8	2
6	2019 covid began	34	2	0	32	-	No avail available data
7	2020	20	3	0	17	3	1
8	2021	20	3	0	17	3	1
9	2022	17	5	0	12	4	2
10	2023	16	8	0	8	4	2
11	2023	17	3	0	14	2	No available data
12	2023	14	0	0	14	0	ongoing

Table 1: Number of Enrolled and Released Prisoners Along with Their Employment Data.

Two inmates have responded : "We wanted to be fashion designers but fashion education was very expensive in our country and we couldn't afford it. It is an opportunity for us to do it now." The women are regularly counselled to lead their lives with a positive attitude and cut the cords of their past. Fashion education has also enhanced the awareness of inmates toward social and ethical practices, which motivates them to become responsible citizens and in fact shape their futures.. Jail authorities believe that "such training involving ethical practices have actually changed their perspective toward life and reduced the return cases to prison to less than half." Inmates re thinking about a new life and not even a day back in prison.

Tina, a homemaker, was imprisoned in July 2019. She suffered from severe depression. Tina underwent counseling and joined the fashion program in August 2019. This led to personal changes for her. She shared her happiness and enthusiasm about learning new techniques on a daily basis during fashion training and is no longer depressed. Today a confident and ambitious Tina hopes to move out of the prison soon and start her own boutique someday. Life has begun on a new note for her.

Rita, an inmate who was a model, joined the fashion program in prison and is very positive to start a clothing label post-release. Fashion education in women's prisons would continue to open many new horizons to build holistic life experience for prisoners.

Fashion education in prison has been transforming lives. It has not only empowered and boosted the morale, confidence, and positivity of the inmates, but has also impacted other organizations and people connected with inmates. A few are described below:

According to Director General, Mr. Sanjay Beniwal, Tihar has expressed in the news for Tihar not being an ordinary prison but a reformation centre focusing on the rehabilitation and acceptance of inmates by imparting skills for a dignified life outside prison. He is very enthusiastic regarding fashion education bringing positive environment in jail premises. He is extremely confident with this successful model for replication in other prisons.

"Educate a girl, empower a nation." This initiative has not only proved to be an incubator of the inmates' talent, equipping them with a new skill to get a new livelihood, but has also helped stop the vicious cycle of these inmates falling into the rut of criminal activities after release. It is acting as the perfect navigator in finding the right means of livelihood in society, and their families can express pride in the women. The earnings of trained prisoners have increased from 2500-8000 INR as shown in figure 20.

The "Skill India Mission" is an important Indian government program under which focused initiatives work to convert India's workforce into a skilled workforce. While the government is running various schemes to provide skills to India's poor and underprivileged, the Tihar Fashion Laboratory has gone a step further by making this mission more "inclusive." Inmates who might not have a place on any government agenda in the context of skill-building have found a place here

The benefits of the program are not limited to prisoners, but has extended to the students and faculty of Pearl Academy, who closely collaborate with the inmates for cultural performances and various fashion shows without any inhibitions. This goes a long way in inculcating acceptance and appreciation for these inmates in the hearts and minds of youth and of society in general. Students selflessly come forward for this initiative and are always keen to partner with inmates. This partnership explains that fashion education can be used to bring hope to many, and that fashion designers can have careers in which they can rebuild society as well.

Inmates were allowed to meet their relatives twice a week and, depending on how their meeting with family members goes, can affect class attendance. Court visits have also limited class attendance several times. Regular counseling and communication with inmates is a must to run the course successfully.

Sometimes inmates are released in the middle of the program, and there has been no provision for completing their training. There have been instances in the past, though, when only the final assessment was left for released inmates, who then received special permission from jail staff to complete the final assessment. This proves that inmates value their learning and completion certificate. Per prison rules, there is a limited exposure to print and online media, which limits the teaching of the design process and latest trends.

Over the last three years, 35% of trained inmates are recorded to be employed. They are enthusiastic and 100% wish to work in the fashion industry, while they are training, but for various reasons released inmates do not join production units or are not willing to keep in touch.

Fashion education has played a very powerful and distinctive role in helping this class of women build a new belief in self, and to recreate a future free of crime.

To quote inmate Rachna, "The program helped in every aspect of my life. I have visited jail three times in last five years because of prostitution and use of drugs. I hope this is the last time as I never got fashion education before in prison. It is a rebirth for me. I hope to get a job in an export house and work day and night to lead a glamorous life full of respect, happiness, and honesty. I want to go up on the runway again one day and not be called as inmate but a designer walking a runway after the show."

"I am happy that I am getting to learn stitching and embroidery. I plan to make clothes for my grandchildren and prove to them that their grandma is not a bad woman," says 58-year-old inmate Raminder Kaur.

"I plan to open a small boutique or a shop where I will make semi-stitched clothes for fat women since it is difficult for them to get the right sizes. I will also make matching accessories," says a beaming Puja.

In its own unique way, the team at Pearl Academy established the Fashion Laboratory at Tihar, and fashion education has become a source of hope for many. More than anything the initiative has contributed to bridging the gap between skill, a dignified life, and a talent pool identified only as criminals!

While consoling Red, his fellow inmate in the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, Andy Dufresne says, "Remember Red, hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies."

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Sincere thanks to Director General of Delhi Prisons, Mr. Sanjay Beniwal who gave a vision to continue the project for women prisoners in Asia's biggest prison complex, Tihar. Our special thanks to Prof. President of Pearl Academy, to trust us and provide all necessary support to work in the complex prison environment. We are thankful to the Creative Arts Education Society to fund the project and supporting inmates by sourcing the fabrics and raw material needed to run the project successfully. Last but not least this program would be impossible to run in prisons without the consistent support of prison staff.

Note: All the names in the case studies are fictional to protect privacy.

## **REFERENCES**

Handbook on Government Schemes and Programs for Prison Officers (2018). Chandigarh: Centre for Criminology and Justice, School of Social Work, Tata Institute of Social Sciences and Institute of Correctional Administration, Ministry of Home Affairs.

Gupta, B. and Grioli, A. (n.d.). Resurgence of Hope and Wellbeing Through Fashion Education in Prisons. [online] doi:<https://doi.org/10.57649/GFC.978-989-54263>.