

Repentance Inside Prison: The Perspective of a Woman in Tanjung Gusta Prison, Medan

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the life experiences of female inmates at the Class IIA Tanjung Gusta Penitentiary in Medan, specifically in interpreting the process of repentance and religious rehabilitation during their incarceration. Utilizing a field study method, the findings indicate that religious guidance provided by religious teachers (ustadz), combined with vocational training, significantly contributes to the inmates' self-transformation. Furthermore, structured religious programs strengthen spiritual and emotional resilience, assisting inmates in managing remorse while fostering new hope. Additionally, independence training—such as sewing, culinary arts, and handicrafts—equips inmates with the productivity needed to reintegrate into society and achieve a prosperous life. Despite constraints in specialized women's health facilities, the gradual internalization of religious values and a professional work ethic reconstructs the inmates' identities into more responsible and positive individuals.

Keywords: *Repentance; Female Inmates; Religious Rehabilitation; Tanjung Gusta Penitentiary.*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendalami pengalaman hidup narapidana wanita di Lapas Kelas IIA Tanjung Gusta Medan, khususnya dalam memaknai proses bertaubat dan pembinaan keagamaan selama masa pidana. Melalui metode studi lapangan, Temuan menunjukkan bahwa pembinaan keagamaan dengan cara bimbingan oleh ustadz, dan pelatihan keterampilan berimplikasi pada transformasi diri narapidana. Lebih lanjut bahwa pembinaan agama yang terstruktur mampu memperkuat aspek spiritual dan emosional, membantu narapidana mengelola rasa penyesalan serta membangun harapan baru. Selain itu, pelatihan kemandirian seperti menjahit, kuliner, dan kerajinan tangan memberikan bekal produktivitas bagi warga binaan untuk melanjutkan

penghidupan di dalam masyarakat secara sejahtera. Meskipun menghadapi kendala dalam fasilitas kesehatan khusus wanita, proses internalisasi nilai-nilai agama dan etos kerja secara bertahap merekonstruksi identitas narapidana menjadi pribadi yang lebih bertanggung jawab dan positif.

Kata Kunci: Repentance; Female Inmates; Religious Rehabilitation; Tanjung Gusta Penitentiary.

Introduction

Penitentiaries are designed as transformative spaces to reintegrate deviant individuals back into the social order of society (Whiteley and Polson 2021). However, the reality on the ground often reveals a sharp contradiction between the idealism of rehabilitative functions and the objective conditions of physical facilities. In the Class IIA Women's Correctional Institution in Tanjung Gusta, Medan, the phenomenon of overcrowding has become a chronic challenge; a facility theoretically designed to accommodate between 150 and 800 people is, in practice, frequently burdened by a population that far exceeds its ideal limits. These congested living conditions do not only lead to the degradation of sanitation, health, and privacy facilities but also create immense psychological pressure for female inmates. For them, prison is not merely a loss of physical freedom but a space filled with stigma, social isolation, and a profound identity crisis (CLEAR et al. 2000).

Amidst such massive environmental pressure, an intriguing phenomenon emerges regarding how female inmates employ coping mechanisms through spirituality. Previous research has often focused on the effectiveness of independence or life skills programs—such as sewing and cooking—as economic capital post-release. However, the aspect of "repentance" or internal transformation amidst limited physical facilities requires further in-depth study, particularly from a gender perspective. Women in prison face an emotional burden different from that of men, including a longing for domestic roles as mothers and wives, as well as a heavier social shame. Therefore, the process of becoming religious in prison is not merely an escape from a harsh reality but a conscious effort to reconstruct the human dignity that had once collapsed (Uche, Uche, and Nzewuji 2025).

Research on the dynamics of life in women's correctional institutions has gained widespread attention but is often fragmented across several primary focuses. Global studies by (Garro 2025; Whiteley and Polson 2021) emphasize that female inmates possess coping mechanisms far more complex than those of men, where social support and religiosity serve as determinant factors in reducing depression levels due to isolation. In the Indonesian context, research by (Equatora 2018; Komalasari, Maya, and Wartono 2025) highlights that limited facilities and overcrowding in women's prisons often trigger deep identity crises, while (Beichner and

Hagemann 2022) underscores the role of independence development as a tool for social reintegration.

The urgency of this research lies in the failure of purely security-based systems to touch the roots of inmate mentality. At Tanjung Gusta Prison, religious development programs and spiritual guidance serve as instruments to manage remorse and internal conflicts. Although inmates must share cramped cell spaces and face limited health services, spiritual activities such as congregational prayers, religious recitations, and religious counseling become oases that provide peace of soul. This phenomenon demonstrates a dialectic between physically restricted space and vast spiritual freedom, where "repentance" becomes the key for inmates to survive and transform into more responsible individuals.

This article aims to explore in depth how female inmates at Tanjung Gusta Prison, Medan, interpret the development process and their spiritual journeys amidst overcrowded prison conditions. By dissecting their subjective experiences—from involvement in life skills programs to the internalization of *taqwa* values—this research seeks to fill the literature gap regarding the sociology of religion in correctional institutions. The novelty of this study lies in the authentic narratives of women who view the prison no longer as a space of ultimate punishment, but as a "sacred space" to rediscover self-identity and moral commitment before returning to the wider community.

Method

This study employs a qualitative method with an existential phenomenological design to explore the profound meaning behind the phenomenon of "repentance" among female inmates at the Class IIA Tanjung Gusta Correctional Facility in Medan. The selection of this design is based on the necessity to capture the essence of the subjects' lived experiences within the prison context. This method applies the technique of bracketing (*epoche*) to set aside all subjective prejudices regarding the inmates' status, allowing authentic narratives of spiritual transformation to emerge without distortion. The researcher positions themselves as the key instrument, conducting participant observation and in-depth interviews to understand a woman's experience while serving her sentence. Data analysis in this study is specifically sharpened using the Theory of Religious Experience. The researcher adopts Joachim Wach's typology, which categorizes religious expression into three main dimensions: theoretical, practical, and sociological. Furthermore, William James' perspective on "religious conversion" is utilized to dissect the internal transition process from a state of the "sick soul" (a soul burdened by guilt) toward "healthy-mindedness" (a healthy and hopeful soul). Data validity is ensured through source triangulation techniques and prolonged observation. The data analysis process follows a circular model consisting of data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, which are subsequently confronted with the theory of religious experience.

Results and Discussion

Profile of Female Inmates at Tanjung Gusta Prison

Based on a study conducted at the Class II A Women's Penitentiary in Tanjung Gusta, the population of female inmates during the research period was recorded at 493 individuals. This study confirms that these 493 inmates constituted the entire population of female residents at the prison at that time. Given that prison occupancy is highly dynamic and subject to frequent changes—due to inmate transfers, releases, or relocations to other facilities—the figure of 493 should not be viewed as permanent or strictly representative of current conditions.

With approximately 493 female inmates residing in a facility ideally designed for only 150 people, the housing conditions are extremely congested. This overcrowding potentially impacts various aspects, including cell space, comfort, ventilation, sanitation, healthcare services, hygiene, and privacy. Several studies have even indicated the existence of both physical and psychological well-being issues among the female inmates in this facility (Deuchar 2018). This fact demonstrates that although the prison serves functions of rehabilitation and reintegration, an inmate load that far exceeds ideal capacity can hinder the effectiveness of these functions and pose risks to the basic rights of the residents. The Tanjung Gusta Women's Prison does not stand alone; it is situated within a larger complex covering a total land area of approximately 97,869 square meters, which houses several correctional units. These units include the Class I Medan Penitentiary, the Class I Medan Special Child Protection Development Institute (LPKA), and the State Confiscated Goods Storage House (RUPBASAN). Specifically, the Class II A Women's Penitentiary occupies approximately 6,455 m^2 of land, with a building area of about 5,250 m^2 . This complex was constructed to replace the old prison on Jalan Listrik, following policies for the relocation and restructuring of the correctional system in Medan since the early 1980s. The boundaries of the prison complex (according to Class I Medan Prison documents) are: to the north, the Class I Medan Special Child Protection Development Institute; to the south, Jalan Lembaga Masyarakat (Jalan Masyarakat) Tanjung Gusta; to the east, the official residential complex for Class I Medan Prison staff; and to the west, the Class I Medan RUPBASAN.

The Class II A Women's Penitentiary is located within the larger Tanjung Gusta Correctional Complex, an integrated area housing multiple correctional institutions. Within this complex, the women's unit occupies a specific section separated from the male residential areas and the child development area, although all are contained within the same perimeter fence. The position of the Class II A Women's Prison is known to be near the main entrance of the Tanjung Gusta complex on Jalan Masyarakat, facilitating the management of staff and visitor movement.

Structurally, the women's residential blocks consist of cell buildings arranged in rows and organized according to modern prison complex patterns: residential spaces are placed near supervision areas to facilitate

officer control. These blocks are surrounded by internal paths accessible to officers and are separated from other blocks by internal boundary walls and open areas that serve as circulation spaces and security control points. The buildings within the Class II A Women's Prison do not only consist of residential cells; they also include administrative offices, healthcare service rooms, a kitchen, vocational training rooms, and places of worship (Eytan 2011). Rehabilitation programs, such as skill-building activities, religious education, and labor training, are conducted in rooms specifically provided for these purposes. These activities are part of the correctional system implemented by the prison in accordance with correctional regulations. The physical structure of the prison exhibits typical characteristics of a correctional institution: surrounded by high walls, guard towers, and multi-layered security systems. The women's block remains integrated within the larger complex, but the activities of its residents are kept separate from other groups to ensure security and more focused management.

Nevertheless, challenges such as overcrowding and limited healthcare facilities have been highlighted in several studies, particularly regarding the specific needs of female inmates, including those who are pregnant (Shen 2024). Ideally, a prison, including the Class II A Tanjung Gusta Women's Prison, should have a capacity that matches its facilities to ensure the basic rights and needs of the inmates are adequately met. However, in reality, the women's section at Tanjung Gusta has far exceeded its ideal capacity: a space ideal for 150 people can be filled by nearly 400, and the total complex, which is ideal for approximately 1,054 to 1,500 people, is burdened by more than double its intended population. This excess capacity puts a strain on facilities, services, and the quality of life for inmates. Narrow spaces, inadequate sanitation and health services, psychological pressure, and the risk of conflict become significant challenges. This condition reflects that "ideal capacity," despite being a legal and facility-based reference, is often failed to be upheld in practice, especially in large and crowded prisons like Tanjung Gusta.

The Class II A Medan Women's Prison ("Medan / Tanjung Gusta Women's Prison") has "several residential blocks," consisting of small and large rooms, including isolation rooms. The reality in correctional facilities (including the Tanjung Gusta complex) is very dynamic: block separation, inmate transfers, and the addition or reduction of blocks can occur at any time, meaning that housing block data can change, and updated public maps detailing the complete women's housing blocks are not readily available. The theoretical housing capacity within these blocks can accommodate approximately 800 people, although the actual number of residents at the time of observation (May 2021) was 664 people.

In a study focusing on female inmates at Tanjung Gusta, it was noted that the residential complex "consists of four blocks," and within those blocks, there are "several small rooms, several large rooms, and one isolation room." It is detailed that the "capacity for 30 rooms" within the women's housing blocks can theoretically accommodate about 800

inmates. At the time of the survey (May 2021), 664 female residents were recorded, with a room-to-inmate ratio of "1 : 22" and a room occupancy rate of approximately 83%. Other research regarding the rights of pregnant female inmates at the Tanjung Gusta Prison shows that facilities, including housing, are often considered inadequate, especially for specific needs such as pregnancy and lactation. However, that study did not provide detailed data on the number of rooms.

Religious Rehabilitation and Spiritual Transformation Programs

The religious development program in Correctional Institutions (Lapas) is a crucial part of the inmate rehabilitation process, aimed at helping them improve themselves, reorganize their spiritual lives, and prepare for reintegration into society. This development is typically conducted through various planned and structured religious activities.

One form of this is religious education, which provides knowledge, understanding, and reinforcement of religious values. In this program, inmates are encouraged to study their respective religious teachings, attend studies, and understand moral values that serve as life guidelines. Additionally, there is spiritual guidance, which emphasizes inner strength and mental peace. Through spiritual guidance, inmates are assisted in coping with mental pressure during their sentence, managing remorse, and building new hope through lectures, group discussions, and reflection sessions.

Another program is religious counseling, which is conducted on a more personal level. In these sessions, counselors help inmates explore personal, family, or adjustment issues within the facility to find solutions aligned with religious values. Overall, religious development programs in prisons do not only focus on ritual worship but also touch upon mental, emotional, and moral dimensions. Through these activities, inmates are expected to transform into better, more responsible individuals ready to lead a positive life upon returning to society (Jang and Johnson 2024).

Life Skills Development

Vocational training development in Correctional Institutions (Lapas) is one of the crucial efforts to equip inmates with skills that can be used as a foundation for life after release. Through this program, inmates are not only taught technical abilities but are also accustomed to working with discipline, responsibility, and productivity. Vocational training in prisons is usually tailored to the potential and needs of the community, so that the results can be utilized directly when they return to the social environment. One form of training often provided is sewing. In this activity, inmates are taught the basics of sewing, pattern making, operating sewing machines, to producing clothing or other products such as bags and household equipment. Sewing training helps them acquire skills that can be used to work in the garment industry or start their own business.

Additionally, there is also cooking training, where inmates are guided to master basic cooking techniques, food ingredient processing,

and hygienic presentation. This training provides the skill set to work in the culinary field, such as becoming a cook, kitchen assistant, or even opening a small food business after release. Another program that is widely developed is handicrafts, such as weaving, woodworking, making accessories, or decorative items. Handicraft activities help inmates channel their creativity while producing products that have market value. Besides training precision and patience, handicrafts can also provide additional income during the development period. In some prisons, agricultural training is also available, ranging from crop cultivation and land processing to the maintenance of productive plants. Inmates are taught correct farming techniques, understanding plant growth cycles, as well as how to harvest and care for agricultural products. This training is very beneficial, especially for those who have a background or interest in the world of agriculture.

The production and industrial activities in Correctional Institutions (Lapas) are part of the vocational development program aimed at encouraging inmates to become more productive, skilled, and ready to be competitive after completing their sentence. These activities do not only train skills but also create a work environment that resembles the industrial world so that inmates can understand the work ethic, discipline, and the actual production process. In these activities, prisons usually manage several business units that produce goods and services. For example, there is a handicraft production unit where inmates create various products such as weaving, wood carvings, simple jewelry, and home decorations. These products are often marketed through exhibitions or in collaboration with external parties, thus providing economic value for both the prison and the inmates.

In addition to handicrafts, there are also processing industry units, such as making bread, snacks, or other culinary products. This activity trains inmates to understand the food production process, from raw material processing to packaging. In some prisons, these production results are marketed to the surrounding community or used to meet the internal needs of the prison. Some prisons also develop textile industry units, where inmates produce clothing, uniforms, bags, or other equipment made through sewing and screen-printing processes. This activity provides work experience similar to the garment industry, so that inmates can obtain valuable skills to enter the labor market after release. Furthermore, there are also agricultural and livestock production activities, such as plant nurseries, vegetable cultivation, poultry farming, or fish pond management. In addition to producing consumption products, these activities simultaneously train inmates regarding land management, animal care, and sustainable production systems.

Experience After Development

The life experience of female inmates at the Class II A Women's Correctional Institution (Lapas) Tanjung Gusta Medan represents a complex social space, where each individual brings a different

sociocultural, psychological, and economic background before entering the correctional system. Their understanding of their status as inmates is not merely a reflection of the criminal act committed, but is also a result of internal interaction with the prison environment, interpersonal relationships, and social constructions formed during their sentence. In this context, female inmates often face significant emotional and social pressures, such as a loss of self-identity, the stress of separation from family, and the social stigma attached to their status as prisoners. Research at this institution shows that the psychological changes experienced by inmates involve a gradual process of self-acceptance, which includes acknowledging past actions and a desire for self-improvement despite being in a highly restricted and regulated environment.

Some female inmates at Lapas Tanjung Gusta describe how they interpret prison life as an important phase in their life journey, rather than just a space for punishment. This is evident from study results showing that many inmates strive to accept themselves better, though it is not easy. This self-acceptance encompasses various aspects, such as the ability to realize personal limitations, taking responsibility for mistakes made, and rebuilding faith in a better future after release. This mental process does not occur automatically; inmates must go through an internal struggle between guilt and the hope for change. This experience serves as a reflection that prison does not only restrain physically but also becomes a space for reflection, psychological transformation, and the reconstruction of self-identity.

The form of female inmates' identity is also influenced by the dynamics of interpersonal relationships within the prison environment. Communication between inmates and officers, as well as interactions among fellow residents, contributes to how inmates form their self-concept within the prison. Some inmates recount that activities such as sports, communal activities (for example, handicraft activities or spiritual development), and even honest dialogues with correctional officers help them regain a sense of self-worth that was temporarily lost due to the sentence served. These types of interpersonal relationships can serve as a medium to foster mutual respect between officers and inmates, which ultimately provides space for inmates to see themselves as valuable human beings, not just as legal subjects subjected to criminal penalties. The inmates' understanding of their rights and obligations is also important to discuss because it directly impacts how they undergo their sentence more meaningfully. Despite the fact that female inmates have rights regulated by law, research shows that the fulfillment of these rights in practice still faces obstacles, especially in the context of health facilities and specialized services for female inmates, such as those who are pregnant. For example, pregnant female inmates in this facility sometimes still experience limitations in adequate health facilities due to a lack of doctors and specialized facilities for maternal needs, even though legally they still have the right to health fulfillment. This incompleteness then shapes their understanding that although the law formally guarantees

basic rights, in reality, there are still many aspects that need improvement to respect the dignity of inmates as human beings who have not only lost their freedom but still have the right to basic services and social protection (Maschi and Dasarathy 2019).

Inmates who previously had work experience, family responsibilities, or roles as mothers tend to have a stronger awareness regarding the importance of behavioral change. They view the prison term as an opportunity for self-reflection and correcting past mistakes. In this context, the understanding of development is not merely formal but also develops internally as a personal need. However, there are still female inmates who do not fully understand their rights and obligations as foster residents. For instance, there are inmates who do not clearly know about the right to receive personality development, independence development, and other rights such as remissions, assimilation, and parole. This lack of understanding can impact the low participation of inmates in the development programs provided by the prison. This indicates the need for increased communication and continuous legal counseling for female inmates.

Becoming a Religious Foster Resident

The daily routine of inmates often begins with structured worship activities, such as performing the five daily prayers in congregation, Quranic recitations, and religious studies, which are part of the scheduled activities in the correctional facility. These activities are not only intended as religious rituals but also as a medium to strengthen a sense of personal closeness to God, which ultimately encourages inmates to develop discipline, self-introspection, and emotional control. Such programs aim to ensure that inmates do not only understand religious teachings theoretically but also internalize the moral meaning behind them, such as patience, mutual help, and humility, which are manifestations of *taqwa* (God-consciousness) in daily behavior.

For many female inmates, the process of religious development becomes an important vehicle for dealing with guilt, regret, and internal conflicts that often arise when being away from family and society. Through religious studies, they begin to reorganize their self-conception from negative perceptions of the past into a new, more positive, and meaningful orientation. Acknowledging mistakes while earnestly striving to improve oneself becomes a practical form of the value of *taqwa* that influences the inmates' mindset. This activity gradually teaches them to shift their focus from mere regret toward efforts for self-improvement and the formation of hope for a better future after their sentence ends (Heriadi 2019).

Furthermore, the religious development implemented within the correctional facility environment also includes instilling values of solidarity and social concern, which are essential parts of a life of *taqwa*. In collective religious activities, inmates are invited to share experiences, strengthen one another, and form a supportive community. This process

helps them overcome the social isolation that often overshadows prison life. Inmates who previously felt alienated slowly build a sense of belonging and a new moral horizon that emphasizes the importance of empathy, humility, and cooperation in group life. Moreover, the value of *taqwa* is also manifested through the acceptance of personal responsibility for past behavior and a commitment to change. Female inmates who actively participate in religious programs tend to show changes in attitude in daily life, such as reducing aggressive behavior, improving interpersonal relationships with fellow inmates, and increasing regularity in carrying out daily tasks in the facility. This shows that the value of *taqwa* is not just a theoretical concept, but also an internal force that influences real actions in their daily lives within the correctional institution.

The process of internalizing the value of *taqwa* also faces its own challenges. Not all inmates are immediately responsive to religious guidance; some still maintain a skeptical attitude or resistance toward spiritual activities. Therefore, prison officers, religious mentors, and related parties often have to combine religious approaches with activities relevant to the inmates' emotional and psychological needs. This includes counseling approaches, personal dialogues, and the provision of spaces for deep reflection so that inmates can more easily understand the essence of *taqwa* in the context of self-change. Furthermore, the value of *taqwa* applied in the lives of inmates also impacts the learning of social ethics and societal norms they must face after release. Values such as honesty, responsibility, and respect for fellow human beings are part of religious teachings that help inmates rebuild their self-confidence and readiness to return to society. Thus, religious development is not just a matter of ritual practice, but also a matter of moral and social transformation so that they have a strong moral foundation in facing life outside of prison (Naldo 2022).

Firstly, mandatory worship activities such as the five daily prayers, *tadarus* (reading) of the Al-Qur'an, and routine *dhikr* (remembrance of God) become an important part of their routine. These religious activities are not only carried out individually but also collectively in the mosque or the facility's prayer room, which indirectly strengthens solidarity among fellow inmates and increases their spiritual awareness of the role of religion in daily life. Special religious activities also occur at certain times, such as during the month of Ramadan, the commemoration of Isra' Mi'raj, the Mawlid of the Prophet, and other Islamic holidays. During these moments, female inmates tend to be more actively involved in spiritual activities, whether through fasting, *kultum* (short lectures), or collective prayers.

Secondly, there are more intensive spiritual development activities, such as routine religious gatherings (*pengajian*), religious lectures, and Al-Qur'an tafsir (exegesis) studies. These activities are usually guided by an *ustadz* (teacher) or mentors from religious institutions collaborating with the prison. Through this program, inmates learn to understand Islamic values more deeply, including ethics, morals, and strategies for dealing with emotional pressure and interpersonal conflicts within detention. The

taqwa-based development process often involves collaboration with external parties, such as scholars (*ulama*), *ustadz/ustadzah*, and religious organizations that provide routine training and moral support.

Conclusions

The correctional programs for female inmates at the Class II A Women's Correctional Institution in Tanjung Gusta, Medan, constitute a comprehensive rehabilitation ecosystem that integrates spiritual, technical, and psychosocial dimensions. Through the internalization of *taqwa* (God-consciousness) within religious development, inmates are guided toward moral transformation and inner peace, which serve as the foundation for behavioral change. This spiritual strength is then synergized with life skills programs and industrial production units—such as tailoring, culinary arts, and agriculture—aimed at restoring productivity and economic independence post-release. Despite challenges in fulfilling specific rights, such as health facilities for pregnant inmates, the process of social interaction and guidance within the facility gradually reconstructs the inmates' self-identity from negative stigma into more responsible individuals. Holistically, the success of these programs is measured not only by the mastery of technical skills but also by the mental and moral readiness of the foster residents to reintegrate positively into the social fabric of society.

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