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Women Sewing in Chinese Prisons: Prison Adaptation Influenced by Vocational Training Program

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Abstract

Our study investigates the relationship between participation in prison vocational training programs and inmates' adaptation to incarceration in a Chinese female prison, with a specific focus on the most common program in this setting—the sewing program. Drawing on survey data from 492 incarcerated women, we employed an OLS regression model to examine how participation in the sewing program relates to prison adaptation, controlling for prison-specific factors and personal/social characteristics. Contrary to expectations, sewing program participation was significantly associated with lower levels of adaptation. In contrast, the mental health score emerged as the strongest positive predictor. These findings suggest that such vocational training programs may not necessarily facilitate inmates' adjustment, and highlight the importance of psychological well-being in the rehabilitative process. The study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of prison vocational training programs and has implications for the design of gender-responsive correctional policies.

Keywords

China; mental health; prison adaptation; sewing program; vocational training program; women's prison

1. Introduction

In China, prisons include several types of programs for rehabilitation purposes, such as vocational training programs, academic educational programs, thought education programs, psychological counseling programs, and recreational and cultural activity programs (Zhao et al., 2019). Among them, the sewing program is the most common form of vocational education, especially in female correctional facilities. Despite their

prevalence, few empirical studies have examined how such programs influence inmates' adaptation in female prisons—a crucial issue considering the psychological stress and social deprivation that characterize long-term incarceration (Crewe et al., 2017).

Prison adaptation is a multidimensional construct encompassing inmates' psychological, behavioral, and emotional responses to incarceration. Scholars have conceptualized this process through various theoretical lenses. One stream emphasizes behavioral conformity—rule compliance, reduced infractions, and program participation—as markers of successful adjustment (Loper, 2002; Toch, 1994). Another strand highlights the subjective quality of life, including interpersonal relationships and perceptions of fairness, which are often assessed using instruments like the Prison Adjustment Questionnaire (Warren et al., 2004; Wright, 1985). A third perspective focuses on psychological dispositions such as criminal thinking and antisocial attitudes (Gendreau et al., 1997; Walters, 2005). Others have examined physiological and cultural aspects, including stress, health outcomes, and adaptation to prison routines (Flanagan, 1981; Haney, 2003). Building upon these traditions, a three-part classification of prison adaptation was proposed: (a) institutional adjustment, referring to an inmate's ability to function and survive within the prison system; (b) societal adjustment, which reflects orientation toward post-release rehabilitation and reintegration; and (c) criminal thinking, involving the persistence of deviant beliefs, values, and subcultural norms (Van Tongeren & Klebe, 2010). This integrated model highlights that adaptation to incarceration is not only about conforming to prison rules but also about how inmates relate to their future lives and the values embedded within carceral institutions.

Vocational training programs are often promoted as key components of prison rehabilitation, offering inmates structured routines, marketable skills, and a sense of purpose. Empirical studies across various national contexts have associated such programs with reduced recidivism, improved post-release employment prospects, and enhanced emotional stability during incarceration (Bales & Mears, 2008; Visher & Courtney, 2007). For incarcerated women—many of whom come from marginalized backgrounds and have experienced limited educational or economic opportunities—vocational programs may also serve as a pathway to empowerment, even within the constraints of prison life (Laghari Balouch et al., 2023).

However, despite these potential benefits, the effectiveness of vocational training in improving in-prison adaptation, rather than post-release outcomes, remains underexplored—particularly in the case of women. Some education and training programs for women in prison are often designed without sufficient attention to their lived experiences, personal aspirations, or psychosocial needs (Danby et al., 2000). In the Chinese context, sewing programs dominate the vocational landscape of female prisons, yet they are rarely evaluated beyond their productive efficiency or disciplinary function. Given their compulsory nature and physical demands, it remains unclear whether such programs truly facilitate adaptation or merely reinforce institutional compliance. This study addresses this gap by focusing on the relationship between participation in female prison sewing program and prison adaptation. By centering on inmates' adaptation during incarceration—rather than solely on their post-release outcomes—it aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of how gendered labor practices intersect with rehabilitation within carceral institutions.

Existing research on prison adaptation is largely shaped by two foundational theoretical models: the deprivation model and the importation model. The deprivation model, proposed by Sykes (1958), posits that adaptation is primarily a response to the institutional environment of the prison itself. According to this view, inmates experience psychological and emotional strain due to the loss of liberty, autonomy, privacy, and

access to social relationships, which in turn shapes their coping behaviors and patterns of adjustment. In contrast, the importation model, introduced by Irwin and Cressey (1962), emphasizes that inmates bring pre-existing individual characteristics into the prison—such as age, education, socioeconomic background, and criminal history—which influence their adaptation styles and interactions within the institution. While both models have offered valuable insights into the mechanisms of prison adaptation, they were developed based on studies of adult male inmates in Western contexts (Zingraff & Zingraff, 2009). Therefore, their applicability to female inmates, whose carceral experiences are shaped by distinct psychological, social, and structural factors, remains limited. As prior studies have pointed out, women's adaptation to incarceration is often more relational, emotionally complex, and context-dependent than that of men (Kassebaum, 1965; Zingraff & Zingraff, 2009). The theoretical foundations of the deprivation and importation models thus require critical reconsideration and expansion when applied to the gendered realities of female imprisonment.

Recognizing the limitations of traditional models, researchers have emphasized the need to adapt deprivation and importation frameworks to reflect women's distinct prison experiences. In the Chinese context, recent studies have also integrated both deprivation and importation factors in explaining adaptation outcomes (Zhao et al., 2019). For example, longer sentences have been found to be associated with increased stress and reduced agency, potentially reinforcing identification with prison subcultures (Thompson & Loper, 2005). Women often enter prison with significant histories of trauma, mental health concerns, and caregiving responsibilities, which complicate their psychological and emotional adjustment (Covington, 2007). Health status, both physical and mental, is often compromised in prison, exacerbating stress and complicating adjustment (Haney, 2003). Unlike men, whose adaptation is frequently interpreted through behavioral or disciplinary metrics, women's prison experiences are more relationally and emotionally oriented, marked by feelings of guilt, separation from family, and loss of social identity (Carlen, 1998). Some female inmates hold internal management roles in China's prisons, involving supervision and organizing labor tasks. These roles are comparable to inmate social roles identified in Western studies (Thomas & Foster, 1976) and may influence inmates' adaptation by altering their social status and responsibilities. Age has been found to play a significant role in institutional adjustment. Older inmates are generally better adapted, exhibiting greater emotional stability and lower levels of disciplinary infractions, potentially due to increased maturity and decreased impulsivity (Zamble & Porporino, 1988). Within China's household registration type, rural-origin inmates may face limited access to social and economic resources during and after imprisonment, adding another layer of disadvantage (Zhao et al., 2020). Younger and less-educated inmates are more likely to experience adjustment difficulties (Zhao et al., 2020). Personal income or economic resources prior to incarceration, though rarely studied in non-Western contexts, have shown mixed associations with prison adaptation score. Family support has been found to serve as a key buffer against depression and anxiety, especially among female inmates (Liu & Chui, 2014), while marital status can influence emotional resilience during incarceration (Zhao et al., 2020).

Despite growing recognition of gendered differences in prison experiences, few empirical studies have systematically examined how vocational programs influence incarcerated women's adaptation within the prison environment—particularly in non-Western settings. Existing research often prioritizes post-release outcomes such as employment and recidivism, while overlooking inmates' lived experiences and psychological adjustment during confinement. This gap is especially pronounced in China, where vocational training programs such as sewing are widespread yet under-theorized as rehabilitative interventions. This

study seeks to address this gap by focusing on the relationship between sewing program participation and prison adaptation scores among inmates in a Chinese women's prison.

2. Methods

2.1. Sampling

This study was conducted in a women's prison located in a central province of China. Unlike male facilities, women's prisons in China do not implement a tiered or hierarchical classification system, meaning inmates with varying sentence lengths and offense types are housed in the same facility. This structural feature enhances the generalizability of findings from a single-site study. The selected prison houses over 1,000 inmates and serves as a provincial demonstration unit, with management practices aligned with national standards for female correctional facilities. Data were collected from two consecutive cohorts of incarcerated women (the 12th and 13th sessions) who participated in the pre-release education program in 2023. This program is a standardized intervention offered to all inmates approaching the end of their sentence, and participation is mandatory, ensuring full sample coverage. The focus on inmates in the pre-release stage offers several advantages: their sentence durations are typically finalized, reducing the impact of pending appeals or sentence adjustments; and their psychological and behavioral responses are relatively stable, allowing for more consistent assessment of prison adaptation score. The two cohorts were separated by a three-month interval to minimize potential contextual or seasonal bias in data collection.

Instead of sampling, this study employed a census approach within the defined target population. All inmates enrolled in the 12th and 13th sessions during the pre-release period were invited to participate. These cohorts included individuals from multiple housing units and varied in offense types (e.g., economic crimes, violent crimes), sentence lengths (from less than three years to over ten years), and levels of correctional performance. Prior to data collection, trained researchers explained the purpose of the study both orally and in writing. Participants were assured of the voluntary nature of their participation, anonymity of responses, and data confidentiality. It was explicitly stated that declining participation would have no impact on their rights or access to prison services. Ultimately, 593 participants were recruited, and 593 valid responses were collected.

The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the prison administration and conducted with the support of the participating correctional institution. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and ethical principles of voluntary participation, confidentiality, and non-interference with inmates' legal or institutional status were strictly followed.

2.2. Variables and Measures

Listwise deletion and imputation were applied for variables with missing values. The dependent variable, prison adaptation score, was measured using the Scale of Experience in Prison (Liu & Chui, 2014), which includes 12 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*), asking about orientation toward rehabilitation, adjustment to the prison setting, and criminal cognition. Listwise deletion was applied to all 12 items. The scale demonstrated good internal consistency in this study, with a Cronbach's α of 0.9193. For each participant, an average score across the 12 items was calculated to represent their level of prison adaptation, with higher values indicating better adaptation.

For the independent variable, participation in the sewing program is a binary variable coded as "0" for *has not participated* and "1" for *has participated*. No missing or invalid values were detected during the data cleaning process.

Control variables included measures for prison-specific factors and personal/social characteristics. The mental health score served as one such control, capturing both prison-specific factors and personal/social characteristics. It was assessed using a single self-reported item on a 5-point Likert scale, in which participants rated their own psychological well-being. The coding scheme was as follows: 1 = *very poor*, 2 = *poor*, 3 = *average*, 4 = *good*, and 5 = *very good*. Six cases reported out-of-range values and missing values; these cases were deleted. Prison-specific factors include sentence length, commutation, and management role. For the variable sentence length, imputation was applied to the 98 missing values. Considering the high skewness of 1.94 before imputation, the median value was used. For commutation, missing cases were largely caused by respondents who never received sentence reductions; the value "0" was used for imputation. The variable was further recoded into a binary variable, where "0" means *no reduction* and "1" means *reduction granted*. In the Chinese prison context, inmates may be assigned to internal management roles, such as team leaders or production supervisors, which involve organizing daily labor tasks or assisting in the enforcement of rules among cellmates. The variable management role is a binary variable, where "0" means *has never served* and "1" means *has served*.

Personal/social characteristics include age, household registration type, total years of education, monthly income before incarceration, and marital status. For age, two cases reported out-of-range values and missing values. After removing the extreme values, the average age is 41.4, with a skewness of 0.42. Imputation with the mean value was applied to the variable age. The household registration type, commonly referred to as *hukou*, serves as a distinctive demographic identifier in China. It denotes not only an individual's place of birth but also the administrative classification of that location. A rural area is frequently associated with socioeconomic disadvantage and systemic marginalization (Han, 2009). *Hukou* is a binary variable, where "0" indicates *non-peasants* and "1" indicates *peasants*; missing values were dropped. For total years of education, missing values were dropped. Monthly income before incarceration refers to the average monthly personal income from legal sources before incarceration. To address the right-skewed distribution and improve model fit, a log-transformed version of the income variable (Ln_Monthly Income before Incarceration) was used in the analysis. Marital status refers to the respondent's current status and was coded as "0" for *without a partner* (including single, divorced, and widowed) and "1" for *with a partner* (including married and cohabiting). Missing values were dropped.

2.3. Data Collection

Survey questionnaires were administered in a classroom setting within the prison. Inmates completed the paper-based questionnaires either independently or with on-site assistance from trained facilitators who were available to clarify any questions if needed. Participation was voluntary, and inmates were informed that they could choose not to fill out the questionnaire without facing any negative consequences. They were also assured that no prison staff would be present during the survey, and completed questionnaires could be submitted anonymously by leaving them on the desk and exiting the room. Blank or incomplete questionnaires were accepted without question. The entire process typically took around 20 to 30 minutes per participant. To ensure comprehension and reduce response errors, instructions were read aloud before distribution, and

assistance was offered throughout the session. All responses were anonymous, and no identifying information was collected.

After collection, the responses were manually entered into Microsoft Excel and subsequently transferred to Stata 18.0 for statistical analysis. This study employed descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis to examine the relationship between participation in the sewing program (independent variable) and prison adaptation score (dependent variable).

2.4. Analytical Process

OLS regression was employed to examine the relationship between participation in the prison sewing program and inmates' adaptation to incarceration. The dependent variable, prison adaptation score, was measured as a continuous score, while the independent variable was participation in the sewing program (coded as "0" for *non-participation* and "1" for *participation*). A series of four nested models was estimated to assess the robustness and consistency of the observed associations by gradually introducing theoretically relevant control variables.

Specifically, in Model 1, we analysed how the dependent variable is influenced by the independent variable. In Model 2, prison-specific factors were added, including sentence length, whether commutation was granted ("0" for *no* and "1" for *yes*), and whether a management role was assigned ("0" for *no* and "1" for *yes*). In Model 3, we added only personal/social characteristics, including age, household registration type ("0" for *non-peasant* and "1" for *peasant*), total years of education, monthly income before incarceration, and marital status ("0" for *without a partner* and "1" for *with a partner*). Finally, Model 4 included both sets of control variables to estimate a fully adjusted model. The mental health score accounts for both prison-specific factors and personal/social characteristics, so it appears as a control variable in Models 2, 3, and 4. All models were estimated using Stata 18.0.

3. Results

3.1. Description of Samples

A total of 492 valid cases were included in the final analysis after listwise deletion of missing values. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of all variables. The prison adaptation score was relatively high, with an average score of 4.26 and a standard deviation of 0.45. Approximately 41.06% of the inmates had participated in the sewing program. About 28.86% of participants had received at least one commutation of sentence. Among participants, 31.5% held a management role within their housing units, such as serving as cell leaders or orderlies. The average mental health score is 3.461 with a standard deviation of 0.943, suggesting relatively good psychological well-being. The average age of participants was 41.4 years with a standard deviation of 10.89. A peasant-type household registration (hukou) was held by 53.05% of the respondents. In terms of education, the average total years of education received was approximately 8.69 years, equivalent to having completed senior high school or higher. The mean monthly income before incarceration was 4,770 RMB, but the distribution was highly right-skewed (Skewness = 7.113). The average sentence length was approximately 34 months (Median = 46.75), ranging from less than one year to over

10 years. Regarding marital status, 54.67% of the participants reported currently having a partner (either married or cohabiting).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics ($N = 492$).

Variable	Mean/%	Median	SD	Skewness
Prison adaptation score	4.262	4.167	0.451	0.066
Sewing program participation (1 = yes)	41.06%	—	—	—
Sentence length	46.748	34	36.328	2.451
Commutation (1 = yes)	28.86%	—	—	—
Mental health score	3.461	3	0.943	−0.115
Management role (1 = yes)	31.50%	—	—	—
Age	41.404	40	10.889	0.425
Household registration type (1 = peasant)	53.05%	—	—	—
Total years of education	8.687	9	3.934	−0.279
Monthly income before incarceration	4769.547	3000	8317.554	7.113
Marital status (1 = with a partner)	54.67%	—	—	—

Table 2 presents the correlations between the dependent variable (prison adaptation score) and all independent variables. As shown, mental health score is positively and significantly associated with prison adaptation score, suggesting that better psychological well-being is linked to more successful adjustment. Sewing program participation shows a modest but significant negative correlation with prison adaptation score, indicating that those who participated may report slightly lower adaptation scores, which may be further explained in multivariate models. None of the other variables—including sentence length, commutation, management role, or marital status—exhibited significant correlations with the adaptation score. Likewise, personal/social characteristics such as age, household registration type, total years of education, and monthly income before incarceration did not show statistically significant relationships with prison adaptation in the bivariate analysis. These findings suggest that, at the correlational level, mental health score is the most robust positive correlate of prison adaptation among the variables considered, while sewing program participation appears to have a complex relationship with adaptation that requires further exploration through regression analysis.

3.2. Regression Analysis

Table 3 reports the results of four nested OLS regression models examining the relationship between sewing program participation and prison adaptation. In Model 1, the model is significant ($p = 0.042$), and explains 0.64% of the variation of the dependent variable. The independent variable, sewing program participation, is negatively associated with prison adaptation score ($b = −0.0839$, $p = 0.042$). People in prison who participated in the sewing program show a 0.0839 decrease in adaptation score. In Model 2, the model is significant ($p = 0.0001$), and explains 4.41% of the variation of the dependent variable. The independent variable has a negative influence on prison adaptation score ($b = −0.104$, $p = 0.012$). People in prison who participated in the sewing program show a 0.104 decrease in adaptation score. The control variable, mental health score, is positively associated with prison adaptation score ($b = 0.097$, $p = 0.000$). A one-point increase in the mental health score yields a 0.097 point increase in the prison adaptation score. The other

Table 2. Correlation analysis.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)
(1) Prison adaptation score	1.000										
(2) Sewing program participation	−0.092*	1.000									
(3) Sentence length	−0.032	0.151**	1.000								
(4) Commutation	0.045	0.088	0.491***	1.000							
(5) Mental health score	0.198***	0.091*	0.067	0.117*	1.000						
(6) Management role	0.058	0.110*	0.438***	0.369***	0.137**	1.000					
(7) Age	0.067	−0.151**	0.195***	0.074	−0.171***	−0.009	1.000				
(8) Household registration type	0.035	0.015	−0.108*	0.024	−0.049	−0.072	−0.239***	1.000			
(9) Total years of education	0.004	0.041	0.020	−0.055	0.174***	0.195***	−0.295***	−0.331***	1.000		
(10) Monthly income before incarceration	0.014	−0.036	−0.078	0.039	0.059	0.033	−0.098*	−0.125**	0.229***	1.000	
(11) Marital status	0.035	−0.078	−0.060	0.003	−0.022	−0.024	0.053	0.019	−0.062	0.044	1.000

Note: $^{*}\,p < 0.05$, $^{**}\,p < 0.01$, $^{***}\,p < 0.001$.

Table 3. OLS regression analysis on prison adaptation score.

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Sewing program participation	−0.084* (0.041)	−0.104* (0.041)	−0.086* (0.041)	−0.084* (0.042)
Mental health score		0.0967*** (0.021)	0.108*** (0.022)	0.107*** (0.022)
Prison−specific factors				
Ln sentence length		−0.012 (0.036)		−0.028 (0.038)
Commutation		0.025 (0.051)		0.019 (0.052)
Management role		0.040 (0.049)		0.047 (0.050)
Personal/social characteristics				
Age			0.005* (0.002)	0.005* (0.002)
Household registration type			0.076 (0.046)	0.073 (0.046)
Total years of education			0.004 (0.006)	0.004 (0.006)
Ln monthly income before incarceration			−0.003 (0.006)	−0.004 (0.006)
Marital status			0.026 (0.040)	0.025 (0.040)
Constant	4.296*** (0.026)	3.994*** (0.138)	3.645*** (0.161)	3.728*** (0.190)
Adjusted R^2	0.006*	0.044**	0.053***	0.050**

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

control variables (sentence length, commutation, mental health score, management role, age, household registration type, total years of education, monthly income before incarceration, and marital status) are not significant/do not show significance. In Model 3, the model is significant ($p = 0.0000$), and explains 5.31% of the variation of the dependent variable. Sewing program participation shows the same trend ($b = -0.086$, $p = 0.035$). Inmates who participated in the sewing program show a 0.086 decrease in adaptation score. Mental health score is the significant control variable ($b = 0.108$, $p = 0.000$). A one-point increase in the mental health score brings a 0.108 increase in the prison adaptation score. The variable, age, is positively associated with the dependent variable ($b = 0.005$, $p = 0.018$). As the inmate gets one year older, the adaptation score increases by 0.005. Model 4 is significant ($p = 0.0001$), and explains 4.98% of the variation of the dependent variable. The independent variable shows the same result as in the other three models ($b = -0.084$, $p = 0.045$), and so does the control variable, mental health ($b = 0.107$, $p = 0.000$). The variable, age, is positively associated with the dependent variable ($b = 0.005$, $p = 0.018$).

To assess the assumption of homoscedasticity, we conducted the Breusch–Pagan/Cook–Weisberg test for heteroskedasticity across Models 2 to 4. The results showed no significant evidence of heteroskedasticity in any of the models. These results indicate that the assumption of constant variance in the error terms holds.

Combined with acceptable VIF values (mean VIF for Model 4 = 1.47), these diagnostic tests suggest that the regression estimates are statistically robust and not affected by multicollinearity or heteroskedasticity.

4. Discussion

This study examined the relationship between participation in a prison sewing program and prison adaptation to incarceration in a Chinese correctional facility. Contrary to common assumptions that prison labor programs promote positive institutional adjustment, our findings reveal a modest yet statistically significant negative association between sewing program participation and prison adaptation. In contrast, mental health emerged as the most robust and consistent positive predictor of adaptation. Additionally, older inmates reported slightly higher adaptation scores, while other personal/social characteristics, such as total years of education, monthly income before incarceration, and household registration type, showed no significant effects. Additionally, inmates who perform well may be assigned supervisory roles, often referred to as management roles within the workshop. These roles typically involve less physical workload and more oversight responsibilities. However, our data showed that being assigned to a management role did not significantly enhance prison adaptation scores, suggesting that the marginal elevation in status or reduced burden does not necessarily translate into psychological benefits or a stronger sense of personal agency.

4.1. Critical Examination of the Sewing Program in Chinese Prisons

The sewing program is widely implemented across Chinese prisons as a core component of labor reform; however, the sewing program is standardized, operating daily with fixed quotas and strict evaluations. Its compulsory nature and alignment with gendered ideals, such as obedience, patience, and diligence, reflect broader traditional constructions of female virtue (Zhang, 2021). Within traditional Chinese culture, women are typically seen as the core of the family, responsible for maintaining relationships and nurturing children. In traditional Chinese culture, the "Four Virtues" (*si de*) theory, which includes skills such as household chores, sewing, and cooking, has long been regarded as a set of ethical codes that women must follow (Vo Van Dung, 2022). Specifically, needlework has long been associated with femininity, patience, and domesticity. The virtues of being a "virtuous wife and a good mother" (*xian qi liang mu*) and "enduring hardships without complaint" (*ren lao ren yuan*) are often celebrated as ideal feminine qualities. However, these expectations are societal constructs imposed on women rather than inherent attributes.

For many women, especially those who do not internalize such values or perceive the work as monotonous and purposeless, these programs may exacerbate internalized stigma and psychological stress rather than alleviate them. Prisons that fail to promote meaning, autonomy, and legitimacy in their regimes risk producing "moral performance failures" even when rules are followed (Liebling, 2004). Additionally, some inmates may perceive sewing not as an empowering educational experience, but rather as a routine, repetitive task with punitive undertones. Previous studies have noted that when vocational training is perceived as compulsory or lacking personal relevance, it may function more as a form of institutional discipline than a tool for rehabilitation. This perception could further reduce the potential of the sewing program to enhance prison adaptation or foster a sense of agency and growth.

In correctional settings, assigning women to sewing tasks may inadvertently reproduce stereotypical gender roles, reinforcing the notion that women are more suited for manual, domestic, or "feminine" work. While

this study did not explicitly examine gendered work assignments, the institutional preference for sewing programs for women warrants critical reflection. Such practices may reflect implicit biases that limit women's access to a broader range of skill-building opportunities, especially those aligned with contemporary job markets. Moreover, in women's prisons, additional "specialty" programs are also offered to address gender-specific needs or reflect traditional femininity. These include literacy education for the illiterate, performing arts groups, and skill-based training in areas such as culinary arts, tea ceremony, hairdressing, and cosmetology. However, these programs often serve more as ceremonial functions with limited reach, as participation is usually selective—reserved for model inmates or activated only for official events and public displays. This selective approach results in low overall engagement, revealing a performative dimension of rehabilitation where the symbolic presentation of reformation overshadows substantive and inclusive programming.

Another explanation for the sewing program's negative association with prison adaptation relates to its diminishing relevance in contemporary society. Sewing, unlike other skill-based programs such as computer training or entrepreneurship courses, fails to align with evolving labor market demands in post-industrial China. This is partly due to technological advances in manufacturing and the mass availability of inexpensive, machine-made clothing. This development is not unique to China; it is a global trend. The economic value of traditional sewing skills has significantly declined due to the increasing reliance on automation in garment production. The shift towards automated machinery in the apparel industry has led to a noticeable degradation of manual sewing skills among workers (Rashid & Rötting, 2021). This technological and economic obsolescence creates a psychological double-bind for participants. On one hand, the program's compulsory nature demands daily engagement; on the other, its practical futility undermines any sense of meaningful preparation for life after incarceration. As a result, inmates may perceive sewing as outdated and disconnected from real-world opportunities after release, which in turn reduces their motivation and engagement with the program.

4.2. The Central Role of Mental Health

We conclude that inmates' mental health showed the strongest and most consistent positive association with prison adaptation. This finding aligns with a broad body of literature suggesting that psychological well-being plays a central role in shaping how individuals respond to the stresses of incarceration. Good mental health facilitates emotional regulation, strengthens coping strategies, and improves interpersonal functioning—all of which are critical for navigating the carceral environment (Haney, 2003). Inmates with stronger mental resilience are more likely to engage constructively with institutional routines, maintain social connections, and develop realistic plans for reintegration. Moreover, psychological well-being is not only an individual trait but is also influenced by the broader prison environment. Research has shown that supportive institutional climates—characterized by respectful staff-inmate relationships, opportunities for self-expression, and procedural fairness—are associated with improved mental health outcomes among prisoners (Liebling, 2004). In this context, mental health may serve as both a resource for, and a product of, positive adaptation: Those who feel mentally stable are more capable of adjusting, while prisons that promote psychological safety can, in turn, improve inmates' mental health. Importantly, mental health has also been linked to reductions in institutional misconduct, depressive symptoms, and recidivism (Covington, 1998; Fazel & Baillargeon, 2011). These findings reinforce the need to position mental health as a cornerstone of prison rehabilitation strategies. Interventions that offer counseling, peer support,

trauma-informed care, and access to mental health professionals can have far-reaching benefits—not only for individual inmates' well-being but also for institutional stability and public safety. As such, strengthening mental health services within correctional settings should be viewed as an investment in both humane treatment and effective correctional policy.

5. Implication

This study highlights the importance of critically re-evaluating the structure and function of vocational programs in women's prisons. While sewing programs remain the dominant form of vocational training in Chinese correctional facilities, our findings suggest a need to assess whether such programs continue to meet the evolving social and economic realities of incarcerated women. Vocational programming should reflect not only labor market demands but also gender-informed expectations, offering inmates meaningful skills that foster both psychological growth and post-release reintegration. In addition, the findings underscore the need for consistent and comprehensive mental health support throughout incarceration, with particular attention to younger inmates, who may be more vulnerable to institutional stress. Institutional mechanisms that screen for emotional distress, strengthen peer support, and ensure accessible mental health services can play a critical role in improving prison adaptation outcomes.

This study focused exclusively on inmates in the pre-release phase, providing insights into how women nearing sentence completion adapt to institutional life. While this focus enables a detailed analysis of gender-specific dynamics, future research could benefit from comparative studies involving male inmates or longitudinal approaches that track adaptation trajectories across different stages of incarceration. Such work would help further contextualize the gendered nature of prison adaptation and support the development of more inclusive correctional policies.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated the relationship between participation in a women's prison sewing program and prison adaptation in a Chinese correctional facility. Contrary to common assumptions that institutional labor contributes positively to rehabilitation, the findings revealed a modest but statistically significant negative association between sewing program participation and prison adaptation. In contrast, mental health emerged as the most robust and consistent predictor of positive adaptation outcomes, highlighting the central role of psychological well-being in navigating prison life. Demographic variables such as total years of education, monthly income before incarceration, and household registration type showed no significant direct associations. Research on Chinese women's prisons remains scarce, particularly concerning how institutional programs shape inmates' psychological and behavioral adjustment. This study contributes to a growing body of empirical work that seeks to understand the unique needs and experiences of incarcerated women in China, but it also represents an early and preliminary attempt.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

Due to the nature of the research, data sharing does not apply to this article.

LLMs Disclosure

For language editing, we made use of the following LLMs: ChatGPT-4o mini and Wordvice AI.

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