A group of five young women walked into the tall historical building with a myriad of feelings: apprehension, excitement and a sense of purpose. We were equipped with tape recorders, notebooks, cellular phones and different aids for the purpose of research. However, to our amazement, we found out that before entering the vicinity of the 'dangerous zone', we had to hand over the different electronic devices. This included cell phones, tape recorders and even flash drives. We had arrived at the premises of Women's Central Jail, Karachi, with the objective of investigating the nature of female crime within Pakistan through conducting in-depth interviews with female prisoners. Our aim was to understand the kind of crimes women tend to commit and the possible reasons which lead them to perpetrate these acts.

What followed was a series of contradictions and surprises. We were led by a jail warden to a small room, utilized mainly as a sitting room for prisoners. We were also able to attract attention from the different women prisoners, who watched us with a mixture of curiosity, awe and resentment. We made ourselves comfortable in the room while a jail warden set out to recruit subjects for interviews. Since we were inside the room, we could not observe the way that they were being asked to participate in the research. Three or four women arrived in a group, shy and hesitant. A constable accompanied them and stayed there during the course of the interviews. It was unclear whether this was for our safety or because the prison was wary that its 'misdeeds' and 'misconduct' would be reported to us (we had been initially mistaken as journalists or people from the press). In any case, this probably deterred the subjects from speaking freely about the nature of their crime.

We were holding conversations in a small room, with two interviews being taken at one time. During this process different jail wardens kept coming in and going out, some women had children with them who proved to be a distraction and other prisoners would occasionally interrupt the interviews to add their bit. This might have also influenced the research outcome. We also encountered something quite unexpected. “Humein phansaya gaya hai,” (We have been falsely accused) was a statement we heard, which was shocking. None of the women we interviewed confessed that they had committed the crime! Later, in a separate interview with a constable, we were told that the lawyers of these prisoners had advised them not to speak of their crimes. They were told to behave as 'victims' rather than as perpetrators.

We interviewed women who were in the prison for numerous reasons. Some of them had killed their husbands, one had managed to kill her entire family so that she could run away with the man she loved, and a few had kidnapped children for ransom prompted by poor socio-economic conditions. A widely publicized case, where a wife had murdered her husband and made curry out of his flesh was discussed within the jail with relish, thus leading to a natural curiosity to speak to the perpetrator. The warden who had been assigned to help us stated that it would be
difficult to recruit her. We requested if we could ask her ourselves. The woman walked confidently around the large area which served as the ground for the women prisoners, where they would sit during the day. Her fellow prisoners also steered clear of her. We approached her quite hesitantly, stating our purpose. She looked at us, up and down, and shook her head, indicating disagreement to be part of our research. We retreated after she said “Mein kyun bataon, jab meiney kuch kya hee nahi hai,” (Why should I tell when I have committed no crime).

Another incident also merits description. There were two women from Africa, both convicted due to drug trafficking across borders. To get a glimpse as to what could have led to this unique crime, the warden was requested to ask for their permission for inclusion within the research. They refused. However, when we were going out, finished with interviewing for that day, they approached us themselves, standing haughty and proud. They were curious about us just like we were curious about them. They asked us where we were from and inquired about our purpose for visiting the jail. Quite chatty, they remarked that our area of study (social sciences) was quite interesting. Slightly emboldened by their friendliness, one of us asked them if they would like to be part of the study. They declined and walked off. What struck me at this point was that the personalities and the demeanor of the women who agreed to participate versus those who declined were quite different. The latter were strong, stood tall and defiant. The former had somewhat submissive postures; two of them had also cried during the process of telling their story.

Paucity of information due to non-admittance of the crime along with the research setting made it impossible for us to meet the initial objectives of our study. I walked out of the prison with my colleagues, with a sense of unfinished business. However, I also realized that I had experienced a few realities that were unexpected and unsettling. In general, researchers would like to know the facts as much as they possibly can. We had mulled over whether to request for case files of the prisoners who were interviewed. The head of the prison had suggested this. Therefore, in essence it was legal to undertake this step. However, we considered the ethical dimension of this action. The research centered on the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee, and knowing more than what we found during the conversation would have violated this. Hence, we came to the conclusion that what may be legal might not necessarily be ethical.

I also thought over the two instances of prisoners refusing to give the interview. Had the other subjects been somehow 'coerced' to give the interview? Research ethics identifies prison populations to be vulnerable to coercion. This is where the idea of voluntary participation comes about. How many of the women had actually fully consented to be part of the investigation? In retrospect, I remembered that the warden had actually insisted that she could make any woman talk if we so desired, but we had told her to ensure that none of the prisoners were forced. We had ensured that our consent forms were in Urdu naively assuming that the subjects would know how to read. We had also insisted that a jail warden acted as a witness to every interview. She did so but after she had belittled us for being overcautious and finicky.
I left the jail with several insights. Lack of awareness about research ethics, including voluntary participation, may lead to such behavior. It made me think that perhaps ethics of research should not be restricted to people doing the research but also made available to the general population. While leaving with a sense of unfinished business, I also concluded that research centered in the sociological world is filled with uncertainty, and therefore, research protocols require some flexibility. An illustration of this is that we were unable to use tape recorders and thus the interviews could not be recorded. This made data collection more difficult and useful information may have been lost in the process. I also realized that, as a researcher, I would have to be well-versed in ethics, and even more importantly accept the responsibility to apply this knowledge.