



Sociology & Cultural Research Review (SCRR)
 Available Online: <https://scrrjournal.com>
 Print ISSN: [3007-3103](#) Online ISSN: [3007-3111](#)
 Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)



Women Prisoners Are The Most Vulnerable Detainees In Pakistan; An Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Women inmates have long been neglected by the prison system due to gender-specific issues. This discrimination is not confined to any one country, but is a global problem. Several critical legal questions remain unresolved regarding female detainees, such as who is most vulnerable and how their vulnerabilities manifest. Additionally, challenges persist in enforcing laws and regulations to prevent the mistreatment of women inmates, both internationally and domestically. While many laws exist to protect female prisoners, the enforcement mechanisms are often inadequate. It is crucial for governments, non-governmental organizations, and international bodies to take continuous action to ensure fair and equal treatment of women detainees throughout their arrest, trial, sentencing, and imprisonment. Attention must be given to the unique issues that arise, particularly those involving the exploitation of women's rights in detention. Effective guidance is necessary to address and eliminate discrimination, requiring changes in management practices and the implementation of measures to make up for the lack of adequate facilities and resources that address the specific needs of female prisoners. International human rights treaties, which are legally binding, require parties to respect these protections. Pakistan, like all nations, is obligated to comply with both international laws and its Constitution, ensuring that prisoners are protected from torture, ill-treatment, and discrimination. Equal protection under the law should be guaranteed to all detainees, with special consideration given to the challenges faced by women prisoners.

Keywords: *Women Prisoners, Gender Equality, Prison Reforms, Legal Aid, Human Rights, Rehabilitation.*

Introduction

The concept of human rights has been ingrained in various philosophical, social, and political thoughts throughout history. The Holy Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) emphasized the importance of human rights, particularly focusing on the fair treatment of women. In Islam, the treatment of women prisoners is regarded with utmost care and respect. The Islamic prison system ensures that prisoners are neither abused nor subjected to inhumane conditions. Throughout history, human rights have been universally recognized, and all religions advocate for the defense of these rights (Sachedina, 2004). The right to life is the most fundamental, as without it, other rights are meaningless. Discrimination against women is a pervasive issue globally, transcending borders and affecting all societies. The violation of women's rights, including violence, is a widespread concern. The Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against

Women identifies violence in three primary domains: family, community, and state-sanctioned violence (UN Women, 1993). Forms of violence include rape within relationships, sexual harassment at work, forced prostitution, female foeticide, infanticide, forced marriages, and honour killings. Despite advancements in scientific and technological progress, violence against women remains a persistent issue (Stark, 2007).

Women prisoners often remain marginalized within the prison system. International and national legal frameworks aim to protect prisoners' rights, yet women prisoners often face many challenges. The prison system is predominantly designed for male prisoners, leaving women to cope with inadequate resources and attention (Rees, 2007). According to the World Prison Brief, female prisoners constitute a significant proportion of the incarcerated population in many countries, including the United States, Hong Kong, and the United Arab Emirates (Walmsley, 2013). In England, the number of women prisoners has increased significantly, doubling over the past few decades (Ramsbotham, 2016). Pakistan has seen a similar trend, where the number of women prisoners has sharply risen in recent years, making them one of the most vulnerable groups within the criminal justice system (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 2020).

Despite the presence of international human rights standards, women prisoners in Pakistan, like in many other countries, remain disproportionately unprotected. These issues highlight the gap between existing laws and their enforcement, and the systemic neglect of women's specific needs in detention (Abdullah & Syed, 2015). The prison system in Pakistan is deeply rooted in colonial-era practices, with the British having established the prison system in the Indian subcontinent during the 19th century (Sohail & Yousaf, 2017). The prison rules in Pakistan were last revised in 1978, and although there have been attempts at reform, the criminal justice system continues to suffer from delays and inefficiency, resulting in the marginalization of vulnerable groups like women prisoners (Nadeem, 2014).

Historically, punishments in prison systems were harsh, focusing on deterrence, with corporal punishments such as mutilation, whipping, and branding being common (Foucault, 1995). By the 18th century, European prison systems evolved to incorporate various forms of incarceration, which marked a significant shift in penal practices (Davidson, 2006). The use of incarceration as a primary form of punishment grew in the 19th and 20th centuries, gradually reducing the use of capital punishment and corporal punishment (Gendreau & Andrews, 2010). The British colonial rulers left a legacy that neglected the rights of women, with traditional customs often taking precedence over formal laws, which led to limited rights for women (Naseem, 2008). The human rights violations against women in Pakistan are widespread, as indicated by reports from the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, which cites numerous cases of sexual assault, burning, acid throwing, kidnapping, and honour killings (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 2020). These violations extend to women prisoners, who experience inadequate protection and are often subjected to abuse in detention.

Islam provides a comprehensive framework for the humane treatment of prisoners, offering clear guidance on prisoner rights and rehabilitation. The treatment of women prisoners is particularly emphasized in Islamic teachings, with the aim of protecting society from the recurrence of crimes and rehabilitating offenders (Al-Qaradawi, 2001). Islam prohibits torture and advocates for justice, requiring that confessions be made voluntarily and not under

duress (Khan, 1997). In Islamic law, punishment is designed to benefit both society and the individual, with the goal of rehabilitation and reintegration (Al-Mawardi, 2000). Despite the theoretical protection provided by Islam, Pakistan's prison system suffers from numerous shortcomings. The treatment of women prisoners is not aligned with the principles of dignity and respect as outlined in international human rights conventions, including the United Nations Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention (United Nations, 1988). Women prisoners in Pakistan face overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, and a lack of privacy. The absence of support systems such as counseling or rehabilitation programs exacerbates the challenges they face upon release (Peters, 2005). These issues have led to a vicious cycle where women prisoners, upon release, are often stigmatized and rejected by society, which hinders their reintegration and perpetuates their marginalization (Villarreal, 2017).

The situation of women prisoners is a complex issue that requires a multi-faceted approach. Both governmental and non-governmental organizations must work together to address the legal, social, and institutional barriers that perpetuate the mistreatment of women prisoners. The international community has a responsibility to ensure that women prisoners are treated fairly and that their rights are protected throughout their confinement (United Nations, 1999). The implementation of international standards, along with the development of effective national policies, is essential to providing women prisoners with the protection and care they deserve.

To improve the conditions for women prisoners, Pakistan must align its prison system with international human rights standards. This includes providing better living conditions, ensuring access to health care, offering rehabilitation programs, and addressing the unique needs of female prisoners. Moreover, it is essential to change the societal attitudes toward women who have been incarcerated and offer them the opportunity for reintegration and redemption (Rehman, 2002). In conclusion, the treatment of women prisoners remains a significant issue in Pakistan and globally. Despite the existence of international human rights standards and Islamic teachings that advocate for the fair treatment of all prisoners, women detainees continue to face systemic neglect and abuse. Reforming the prison system to align with international standards, ensuring the humane treatment of women prisoners, and addressing the societal stigma they face are crucial steps toward achieving justice and equality for women in detention.

Challenges and Legal Framework for Women Prisoners

The current state of women's prisons around the world is unsatisfactory, with women inmates feeling insecure due to their unique medical, psychological, and financial needs (Baker, 2005). Women prisoners differ significantly from male offenders, and this distinction requires tailored approaches in the criminal justice system to address their specific issues, including mental health concerns and lack of adequate resources (Cohen, 2008). An effective criminal justice system must incorporate three key dimensions to ensure justice for all prisoners, particularly women:

Reforms to the criminal justice system to make international standards effective, support for states in implementing these standards, and the promotion of best practices to meet unique national needs (Schneiderman, 2012). States must take stronger actions to prevent torture and ill-treatment of women prisoners. This can be achieved through effective safeguards to

prevent abuse, countering impunity, and establishing independent monitoring mechanisms (Amnesty International, 2014). Justice and equity form the foundation of a sound legal and regulatory framework. A key requirement is a robust system of checks and balances. Data collected on female prisoners in Pakistan shows varying numbers of women incarcerated across provinces: Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Baluchistan, Azad Jammu & Kashmir, and Gilgit Baltistan (Fatima, 2016).

Women prisoners remain one of the most neglected groups in society, with their incarceration rates increasing rapidly in recent years (Hinton, 2018). The dominant male perspective in the criminal justice system has caused significant problems for women, particularly in prison. The recognition of prisoner rights by international organizations is essential, but these rights are often not directly enforced within national systems, leading to gaps in protection (Smith & Roberts, 2019).

International and National Legal Provisions for the Protection of Women Prisoners

The protection of women prisoners is a significant issue in both international and national legal frameworks. Numerous international laws and conventions have been established to ensure that female prisoners are treated with dignity and respect, and these laws advocate for their rights and protection from violence, discrimination, and inhumane treatment. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is one of the most significant documents in this regard, outlining the inherent dignity and equal rights of all human beings (UN, 1948). It affirms that all individuals possess dignity, honor, and rights regardless of their gender, and this principle extends to women in prison (Bielefeldt, 2010).

The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, also known as the Nelson Mandela Rules, provide detailed guidelines regarding the humane treatment of all prisoners, including women. Rules 3 and 5 stress the importance of maintaining human dignity within the prison system, while rules 8 and 8(a) specifically address the separation of female prisoners from male prisoners, ensuring that women are not exposed to any form of abuse or exploitation (UN, 2015). These rules also guarantee access to proper accommodation, fresh air, adequate lighting, sanitation, medical care, and the right to contact family members (United Nations, 2015). The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), another key document, protects individuals from cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment. Article 6 and 9 prohibit the death penalty and ensure the right to amnesty, while Article 14 states that no one should be compelled to confess guilt (United Nations, 1966). This is particularly important for women prisoners, who are often subjected to forced confessions or abuse within the prison system.

The Geneva Convention and its Additional Protocols further elaborate on the rights of prisoners, particularly prisoners of war, including women. Articles 13, 14, 15, and 16 of the Geneva Convention III (1949) emphasize humane treatment, protection of honor, medical care, and the prevention of violence against female prisoners of war (International Committee of the Red Cross, 1949). These provisions aim to prevent gender-based violence and ensure that women prisoners are treated with respect and dignity. The Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT) is another significant legal instrument that prohibits torture in all forms. This includes both physical and psychological torture used to extract information or confessions from prisoners

(United Nations, 1984). The protection of women prisoners from such treatment is essential to safeguarding their rights and maintaining their dignity in detention.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CEDAW) is particularly relevant in the context of women prisoners, as it emphasizes the right to protection against violence or bodily harm, including harm caused by government officials, individuals, or institutions (United Nations, 1979). While it does not directly address prisoners, CEDAW's provisions for protecting women from violence are crucial for ensuring that women prisoners are not subjected to abuse while in custody.

The United Nations Bangkok Rules, adopted in 2010, provide a comprehensive framework for the treatment of women prisoners. Rule 19 and 20 emphasize the right to dignity during body searches, ensuring that such searches are conducted with respect and by personnel of the same gender. These rules also call for alternative screening methods to ensure that women are not subjected to unnecessary or degrading procedures (United Nations, 2010).

The European Prison Rules also provide protection for women prisoners. Rules 54(3) and 54(4) ensure the right to dignity during body searches, while Rule 54(5) mandates that such searches be conducted by female staff. Additionally, Rule 54(7) stipulates that medical practitioner must carry out any necessary body searches to maintain a high standard of care (Council of Europe, 2020). At the national level, Pakistan's legal framework guarantees certain rights for women prisoners. The Constitution of Pakistan ensures the right to life and freedom of movement under Articles 9 and 15, respectively, and Article 14 protects individuals from inhumane treatment (Constitution of Pakistan, 1973). The Prison Act of 1894 also includes provisions for the separation of female prisoners from male prisoners, while the Pakistan Prison Rules of 1978 further elaborate on the rights of female prisoners, including medical care, separation from male prisoners, and contact with family members (Government of Pakistan, 1978).

The Punjab Prison and Correctional Services Act of 2015 provides additional protections for women prisoners. Article 10(ii) and 26(a) guarantee respect and protection of human rights for inmates, including women. The Act also includes provisions for the right to medical facilities, a healthy environment, and contact with the outside world (Punjab Government, 2015). Furthermore, it ensures that female prisoners are separated from male prisoners and that their specific needs, such as the care and protection of pregnant or breastfeeding women prisoners, are addressed (Punjab Government, 2015).

In conclusion, international and national legal frameworks provide vital protections for women prisoners, ensuring their humane treatment, access to medical care, and protection from violence and discrimination. However, these protections are often not fully implemented or enforced, leaving women prisoners vulnerable to abuse and mistreatment. Effective implementation of these laws and reforms in the prison system is necessary to guarantee that women prisoners are treated with the respect and dignity they deserve.

Challenges in the Implementation of Prison Laws and Conditions for Women Prisoners

The prison system in Pakistan is governed by several laws and regulations designed to ensure the fair treatment and rights of prisoners. Key legislative frameworks include the Prisoners Act, 1900, The Pakistan Penal Code, 1860, and The Criminal Procedure Act, 1898, which provide a structure for the classification, management, and treatment of prisoners, including provisions for appeals, petitions, and the separation of prisoners based on gender (Ranjan,

2011). These laws also provide guidelines for the treatment of prisoners, including their confinement conditions, rights to legal aid, and access to medical care. While these laws aim to protect prisoners' rights, their practical implementation, especially for women prisoners, faces numerous challenges.

One of the most significant issues in the prison system is overcrowding, which affects the ability to provide fair and humane treatment to prisoners. Although the number of female prisoners in Pakistan is relatively smaller compared to male prisoners, overcrowding remains a problem. For instance, in Gujranwala Central Jail, as of March 1, 2016, the number of female prisoners was 73, while the accommodation capacity was only 34 beds (Chaudhry, 2016). Overcrowded prisons exacerbate issues related to hygiene, sanitation, and access to basic needs like food and water. In many prisons, women prisoners have inadequate space, and the living conditions are substandard, especially during colder months when the lack of proper heating or insulation worsens their discomfort (Ahmed, 2014). The provision of blankets, for instance, is often insufficient, with many prisoners facing additional health risks due to the cold temperatures.

Another critical issue is the lack of proper sanitation facilities in most prisons. Inadequate washroom facilities contribute to poor hygiene conditions, which in turn lead to various health problems. For example, in Gujranwala Central Jail, seven washrooms were shared among 73 female prisoners, which is far from ideal (Chaudhry, 2016). Moreover, the absence of separate bathing areas and the lack of adaptation for women with disabilities further highlight the systemic neglect of the specific needs of female prisoners (Garg, 2015). These conditions violate international standards for the treatment of prisoners, which emphasize the importance of proper sanitation, privacy, and the right to health.

Medical care is another area where Pakistan's prison system falls short, particularly when it comes to female prisoners. Despite the provisions in various laws, such as the Pakistan Prison Rules, 1978, which call for adequate medical treatment for prisoners, the reality in many prisons is quite different. Women prisoners often lack access to specialized medical care, and the absence of permanent female medical staff is a significant concern (Ranjan, 2011). For example, female prisoners who are pregnant or breastfeeding may not receive the necessary care and support to ensure their health and well-being during detention. The inadequate medical infrastructure, including the lack of proper medical facilities and equipment, further compounds these issues.

The quality of food provided in prisons is also a major concern. Rule 20 of the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners mandates that prisoners have access to nutritious food and clean water. However, in many Pakistani prisons, the quality of food is poor, with reports of food being excessively oily, undercooked, or unhygienic (Smith, 2016). This neglect not only affects the physical health of prisoners but also contributes to a general sense of deprivation and injustice. Moreover, inadequate transport facilities for prisoners further exacerbate the issue. Prisoners are often transported in poorly maintained vans, which are uncomfortable and humiliating, further eroding their dignity and human rights (Garg, 2015).

Despite these challenges, Pakistan's legal framework does include provisions that theoretically protect women prisoners. For example, the Constitution of Pakistan guarantees fundamental rights to all citizens, including prisoners, under articles such as 9 and 15, which

provide for the right to life and freedom of movement (Constitution of Pakistan, 1973). The Prison Act of 1894 also contains provisions for the separation of male and female prisoners and ensures that the rights of female prisoners are upheld. However, the implementation of these laws remains inadequate due to corruption, lack of resources, and insufficient political will to enforce them effectively (Ranjan, 2011).

Furthermore, the Punjab Prison and Correctional Services Act of 2015 attempts to address the specific needs of female prisoners, including their right to respect, medical facilities, and communication with the outside world (Punjab Government, 2015). The Act also stipulates that female prisoners should be separated from male prisoners and provides guidelines for the rehabilitation and care of female inmates. However, despite these provisions, the realities of overcrowding, poor living conditions, and inadequate medical care persist, highlighting the failure to effectively implement these laws.

In conclusion, while Pakistan has established a legal framework to protect the rights of women prisoners, the implementation of these laws remains severely lacking. Overcrowding, inadequate sanitation, poor medical facilities, and insufficient food and bedding are just some of the issues that female prisoners face. The prison system in Pakistan needs urgent reform to ensure that women prisoners are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve. This includes better implementation of existing laws, better allocation of resources, and increased political will to address the challenges faced by women prisoners in Pakistan.

Conclusion

In Pakistan, despite the country being founded on Islamic principles, the treatment of women, particularly in prisons, remains a significant issue. Islam, as a comprehensive way of life, emphasizes the protection, respect, and security of individuals, including women. However, the reality in Pakistan often falls short of these ideals, with women facing increasing victimization, particularly within the prison system. The dire conditions of jails in Pakistan must be addressed and brought in line with international standards to ensure that women prisoners are treated with dignity, respect, and equality.

International declarations and agreements play a crucial role in combating violence against women prisoners. These frameworks provide the foundation for advocating better living conditions, legal aid, and protection from abuse. However, the ultimate solution lies in achieving gender equality, ensuring that women are not subjected to discrimination in any form, particularly in the justice system. To create real change in the country, it is essential to overcome deeply rooted prejudices and ignorance regarding the true status of women in society. As a nation, Pakistan can implement significant reforms by focusing on the empowerment and upliftment of women in prison.

To improve the treatment of women prisoners, it is necessary to strictly adhere to both the Constitution of Pakistan and international human rights laws. These documents guarantee fundamental human rights, and their application in prisons should be ensured. Recommendations for the betterment of women prisoners include installing necessary facilities, such as water plants and well-equipped medical units, and establishing medical laboratories. These improvements would address the long-standing issues regarding inadequate medical care for women prisoners. Additionally, the government must develop a mechanism to implement prison regulations strictly, ensuring that existing laws are not merely symbolic but practically enforced.

The provision of basic rights, such as access to adequate food, clean water, and sanitary conditions, is essential for the well-being of female prisoners. Ensuring that prisons are not overcrowded and that women have their own separate accommodations, including individual cells and proper bedding, should be prioritized. The government should invest in improving the infrastructure of prisons, making them more conducive to rehabilitation and personal growth. Such infrastructure should also include proper ventilation systems and the establishment of mother and baby units for pregnant women prisoners.

Legal reforms are also crucial for the betterment of women in prison. A clearer and fairer investigation process should be introduced to prevent women from being wrongfully detained or subjected to fabricated cases. The prison system should ensure that female prisoners are protected from abusive environments, and that female staff members handle investigations involving women. At the legal level, outdated prison laws should be reviewed and modernized, with a focus on expediting case resolutions in courts. Legal aid should be provided to women prisoners, especially in cases of capital punishment, ensuring that no woman is denied her right to a fair trial.

In addition to infrastructural and legal reforms, providing women prisoners with educational programs and vocational training will contribute to their rehabilitation and reintegration into society. Education and skill development can offer women alternatives to a life of crime, ensuring that they have the necessary tools to rebuild their lives once released. Moreover, NGOs, civil society organizations, and women's rights activists must play an active role in providing free legal aid to women prisoners. These groups can help raise awareness of the issues faced by women in prisons and advocate for their rights.

The emancipation of women in prison can only be achieved if their basic human needs, such as secure work placements, education, and the right to make choices, are met. By providing female inmates with opportunities for personal development, society can help them break the cycle of criminal behavior and re-enter society as productive individuals. A comprehensive campaign to raise awareness about the plight of women prisoners should be launched, focusing on the importance of gender equality and the fair treatment of women in the justice system.

Ultimately, the transformation of Pakistan's prison system and the empowerment of women prisoners are not only moral imperatives but also essential for the country's progress. By addressing the issues faced by women in prison, Pakistan can ensure a more just and equitable society, where every individual, regardless of gender, has the right to live with dignity, freedom, and respect.

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