



## Women prisoners' rights and quality of life in Haryana prisons: A socio-legal empirical study

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### Abstract

Women prisoners represent a template, but a very weak section of the population in the Indian prison system, and their conception and governance in the penal system is still gender-neutral but gender unequal. This paper will examine the rights and Quality of Life (QoL) of women in prison infrastructure in Haryana from a socio-legal empirical perspective. The study will be based on fieldwork in four prisons: Sirsa, Sonipat, Ambala, and Hisar, to analyse data from 189 incarcerated women using a modified WHOQOL-BREF instrument, supplemented by interviews and legal analysis. The results show that there is consistent overcrowding of women's units, a chronic lack of women staff, general under-trial detention, and gross inaccessibility to legal aid. Meaningful, although moderately positive perceptions of physical safety, autonomy, and mental health support, as well as procedural justice, are impaired. The paper presents incarceration as a dimension that has not been taken seriously, especially in the concept of motherhood. It concludes that the incarceration of women in Haryana is an expression of structural disconnect between constitutional mandates and the practice of incarceration, and therefore, it is critical to provide gender sensitive prison governance based on human rights principles.

**Keywords:** Women prisoners, prison rights, quality of life (QoL), Haryana prisons

### Introduction

Women are a low numeric ratio part of the prison population in India, but their reception to incarceration is influenced by disproportionately brutal deprivations. Historically, the Indian prisons were developed to cater to the male inmates, and even with the constitutional guarantees of equality and dignity, the unique needs of the women still face a disjointed and peripheral solution. These are the most gendered aspects of incarceration concerns, namely health, access to legal situations, need to take care of another person, and simply the autonomy and everyday lives, in the face of which institutional structures are poorly attentive to the real women's issues as a lived context. Scholarship on Indian prisons has increased in recent years, but there is little evidence and research studies in which women prisoners are treated as subjects of rights (Mateen, 2025) [1]. Current studies are more likely to be based on aggregate statistics or a theoretical track, or look at the aggregate doctrines of how constitutional promises are actually felt in the prison walls. Lack of systematic Quality of Life (QoL) measures also limits the chances to assess the imprisonment not only concerning legality and discipline. This is the gap that matters greatly when it is well known that not only are the women inmates confused with fake hopes, but their dependent children, family, and the social network at large. Haryana is an important location for the study of these problems because of both the heterogeneous prison infrastructure and disparate degree of overcrowding, as well as the lack of women-exclusive facilities in larger institutions dominated by men (Munot, 2017) [2]. Women prisoners in the state typically end up in small and resource-strained cells, where congestion, absence of enough staff, and limited access to legal and healthcare services increase the gendered vulnerabilities. The prevailing role of the under-trial imprisonment also brings issues and worries in terms of procedural equity and sustained denial of freedom. It is on this background that the current research paper takes a socio-legal empirical research method to explore the topic of women prisoners' rights and Quality of Life in Haryana

prisons (Aggarwal, 2022) [3]. The research, based on a combination of legal analysis and field-based evidence, aims to step out of the abstract discourse of rights and shed light on the daily circumstances within which the practices of negotiating justice, dignity, and well-being under confinement exist.

The paper under exploration reflects on the understanding of the approach to how the rights of women inmates are achieved and fulfilled in practice in the prison regime in Haryana, with specific attention to Quality of Life as a substantive gauge of custodial justice. It says that even after the legalization of the rights of the prisoners in India, the concept did not translate into practical institutional practice among women, and that there will always be a gap between what the constitution stated and what the carceral experience will be. The paper uses empirical evidence gathered among 189 women inmates and in four prisons in Haryana to analyse the most important aspects of incarceration, such as overcrowding, staffing, legal representation, healthcare service, autonomy, security, and psychosocial wellbeing. The paper illustrates that though female prisoners typically claim to experience a certain elementary sense of physical security, it comes at a very limited price and manifests in very organized settings; it necessitates extreme levels of regulation on agency, emotion, and access to justice. Undertrial detention prevalence and the almost total breakdown of legal assistance systems became the primary structural failures, and they were mostly applied to socio-economically marginalised women. The paper also presents the issue of motherhood as an important, but underrepresented area of women's imprisonment, showing the effect of incarceration on the generation of consequences that are poorly reflected in the current legal system. Locating empirical evidence in the context of feminist legal and human rights approaches, the paper adds to the prison research area by re-exploring the issue of incarceration of women as a dignity, equality, and institutional responsibility issue, but not as a custodial control one.

### Research objective

1. To examine the extent to which the rights of women prisoners are recognised and realised in practice within Haryana prisons, with reference to constitutional guarantees, statutory provisions, and judicial standards.
2. To assess the Quality of Life of women prisoners in Haryana using multidimensional indicators, including physical health, psychological well-being, social relationships, environmental conditions, autonomy, and personal safety.
3. To analyse patterns of access to justice among women prisoners, focusing on undertrial detention, availability of legal representation, and the functioning of legal aid mechanisms inside prisons.
4. To identify institutional and structural factors affecting women's incarceration, such as overcrowding, staffing shortages, infrastructure, and prison governance practices, and their gender-specific impacts.
5. To compare the lived experiences of women prisoners across selected prisons in Haryana (Sirsa, Sonapat, Ambala, and Hisar) in order to highlight intra-state disparities and best practices in custodial conditions.

### Gendered Incarceration in India

Arrest and imprisonment of women in India should be viewed through the system of a historically male-structured, male-experienced, and male-assumed penal system. Though women make a small percentage of the entire prison population, the fact that they are a peripheral number has created a form of invisibility in the institutions instead of safety. The Indian prisons were made with the main aim of disciplining males and controlling them, so that including females in their framework has been more accommodative than transformative. This causes the women prisoners to often be segregated in separate units amongst male prisons of significant size, where infrastructure, staffing, and daily routine arrangements are not well-suited to respond to their own social, biological, and psychological needs (Anand *et al.*, 2023) <sup>[4]</sup>. The incarceration is also gendered by the socio-economic background of the female offenders who are admitted to prisons. A major percentage of female inmates have backgrounds of marginalisation, which include poverty, low levels of education, caste disadvantage, and domestic violence or desertion. To most of them, incarceration is not merely a legal break but also an extension of structural vulnerability. The criminal justice system usually does not take into consideration such overlapping disadvantages and places women offenders under a gender-neutral system that hides the unique access to crime and the unique experience of punishment. Indian legal changes and judicial activism in India have increasingly stated that inmates do not renounce their fundamental rights and privileges when they get into prison. There are constitutional safeguards on Articles 14 and 21 that safeguard the right to keep a dignified status, health, and fair hearing even in custodial facilities and judicial precedent. Nevertheless, the normative guarantees are not translated into an institutional practice, especially by women (Kumari, 2024) <sup>[5]</sup>. The lack of female-disabled facilities, insufficient supply of female employees, and poor availability of medical services and legal assistance demonstrate that there has always been an alienation between the law and the practice. Placing women in India in prison in the context of incarceration, therefore, necessitates

looking past the legal element to determine the manner in which gender functions across the day-to-day governance of the prison. The imprisonment of women does not just appear as the issue of custody, but it reflects a deeper structural inequality, which lies in the penal system itself.

### Rights and Life in Custody

The acknowledgment of the rights of prisoners in law does not always guarantee the realisation of the rights in practice. Rights in custodial settings may even lie outside the realm of formal legality and may be meaningful through lived experiences. In the case of incarcerated women, the enjoyment of rights takes not only the form of the law but also the interaction with prison officials daily, the use of basic services, and the extent of control over their bodies and patterns. Imprisonment turns rights into bargained-out privileges where dignity, privacy, and agency are often sacrificed in the name of institutional needs of surveillance and order. The perception of rights in custody would thus involve a change in approach from a legalistic approach to an experiential approach (Varghese, 2022) <sup>[6]</sup>. The first-hand experience of incarceration demonstrates how the procedural guarantees, including healthcare, legal advice, or personal security, are frequently filtered through the prism of overcrowding, staffing shortages, and discretionary authority. Under these circumstances, women prisoners can be determined to have rights, yet they are still incapable of exercising them in any manner. This disjunction suggests the weaknesses of the approach to prison conditions evaluation based on legal norms only, without looking at the ways the same norms apply to everyday life. The Quality of Life (QoL) offers a dire perspective through which the gap between law and living reality can be filled. Since it is a multidimensional construct covering physical health, psychological well-being, social relations, and the environmental conditions, QoL will be used as a measure of human rights in the territory of custodial spaces (Thulasiraman, 2011) <sup>[20]</sup>. It allows evaluating imprisonment beyond the lack of obvious mistreatment and the presence of conditions that promote a minimum level of human dignity. In the case of women convicts, QoL would measure aspects of the dimensions not specifically focused on in the penal policy, including emotional security, independence, and caregiving. To have a substantive understanding of the rights in custody, it is important to connect the concepts of dignity, autonomy, and well-being. Dignity is not simply maintained by physical security but by acknowledging prisoners as responsible people who can make decisions in a limited context. Well-being, in its turn, is subject to how much the institutional practices are such that women can maintain control of their bodies and time, as well as social relationships (Kumar & Kumari, n.d.). By viewing rights through the lens of Quality of Life, then, Imprisonment comes to be understood in terms of a human rights problem that lies in the daily lived situations and not in some abstract legal adherence.

### Legal and Policy Framework

The rights of women prisoners in India are rooted in law via legal provisions of the constitution, legislation, judicial interpretation, and international human rights jurisprudence, which in turn is based on the normative foundation of custodial justice. Article 14, at the constitutional level, ensures equality in the face of the law and does not permit

any arbitrary discrimination, and follows that the basis of equality be substantive and not formal, as far as women inmates are concerned, in relation to the administration of prisons. Article 21, which has been broadly construed by the Supreme Court to cover the right to life and personal liberty, dignity, health, privacy and humane terms of detention, and Article 39A requiring the State to guarantee equal access to justice, in the form of free legal aid, is of particular importance in the context of the large percentage of untried female prisoners (Kumari, 2025) <sup>[10]</sup>. As a statute, the Prison Act, 1894, the colonial character of which is nevertheless still active, still governs the administration of prisons, supplemented by state prison manuals, which contain some very limited information on the subject of women, including accommodation, health, and discipline. Additional procedural protections on the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973, extend the rights to receive legal representation, bail, and a fair trial, although this is inconsistently applied to the custodial environment. An important case that has been used to promote the rights of women prisoners is *Sheela Barse v.*, administered by the judiciary. Judicial pronouncements have played a critical role in advancing women prisoners' rights, notably in *Sheela Barse v. State of Maharashtra*, where the Court emphasised legal assistance, custodial dignity, and protection from abuse, and in *R.D. Upadhyay v. State of Andhra Pradesh*, which laid down comprehensive guidelines for the care of children living with incarcerated mothers (Jafri, 2021) <sup>[11]</sup>. Later, in *1382 Prisons*, the larger issue of systemic overcrowding was highlighted, and the need to implement a human approach to prisons was emphasized. These domestic frames are supported by international standards such as the UN Bangkok Rules, which codify gender particular protections on custody, the Nelson Mandela Rules, which set minimum requirements on humane treatment of prisoners, as well as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which ensures the state responds to gender-based weaknesses on the penal framework (McLeod *et al.*, 2025) <sup>[12]</sup>. These structures together provide a strong normative structure that requires translation to the practice of the day institution.

## Research Methodology

### Research Design

The current research design is a socio-legal study design, which presents a mix of the doctrinal, empirical, and analytical methodologies to address the issue of the rights and Quality of Life of women prisoners in Haryana prisons. The doctrinal part is the critical examination of the constitutional clauses, the law statutes, the court decisions, and the international norms of addressing the rights of prisoners. The empirical part aims at gathering primary data in order to evaluate the everyday life experience of these legal norms in the custodial life. This is an integrated process that allows a thorough assessment of the incongruence between the law and practice.

### Universe and Sample

The study sample is the universe of women who are incarcerated in selected prisons of Haryana. The sample used in the empirical study is 189 female inmates sampled in District Jail Sirsa, District Jail Sonapat, Central Jail Ambala, and Central Jail No. 2 Hisar. Since this was a sensitive research and limited access to prison populations,

purposive sampling was used to enable the inclusion of respondents who were willing and able to respond to the research study, especially with regard to undertrial and long-term inmates.

### Data Collection Tools

A modified WHOQOL-BREF questionnaire was used to gather primary data; however, it was adjusted and modified to include prison-specific factors that influenced the Quality of Life of women with references to their physical, psychological, social, and environmental aspects. To complement the quantitative evidence, semi-structured interviews were used with the specific women prisoners, legal aid counsels, officials of the prisons, as well as representatives of the civil society organisations. Specific field notes on infrastructure, hygienic conditions, housing, and the way staff members behaved and how they conducted their daily life were also taken, to put the responses of the survey in perspective.

### Data Analysis Techniques

Descriptive statistical tools such as frequency distribution and mean scores were used to analyse quantitative data. Comparative analysis that was jail-wise was conducted to ascertain differences in conditions of custody whilst at the chosen prisons. The thematic coding was used to analyse qualitative data collected via interviews and observations to enable repetitive patterns pertaining to dignity, autonomy, access to justice, and institutional practices to appear. To increase the level of reliability and depth of analysis, triangulation of different data sources was utilized.

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards of research were followed by the study. All the participants gave informed consent, and anonymisation of responses ensured confidentiality. The participation of the respondents was completely voluntary, and no coercion or inducement of any kind was involved. Psychological distress was minimised, as the vulnerability of incarcerated women was observed.

### Limitations of the Study

The research had limitations caused by limited access to some parts of the prison facility and administrative barriers. Also, the absence of data or some aspects of the data about Central Jail No. 2, Hisar, restricted the overall comparison of prisons. Nevertheless, these limitations do not distract from the relevance of the findings that help to gain knowledge about the rights and QOL of the women prisoners of Haryana.

### Empirical Findings and Analysis

The empirical findings of the study reveal significant structural and experiential dimensions of women's incarceration in Haryana prisons, highlighting the persistent gap between legal norms and lived realities.

### Gender Distribution and Overcrowding

Even though the overall prison population of women makes a rather low percentage, the statistics reveal that there is still a significantly troubling tendency of overpopulation in the female enclosures. Some prisons had the approved number of women prisoners filled, causing overcrowding at the cell level, poor sleeping facilities, and poor hygiene. Crowding

exacerbated stress and lack of privacy, as well as access to minimal amenities, with women bearing the burden of this issue because of the limited and closed nature of their living space (Bright *et al.*, 2022)<sup>[13]</sup>.

### Staff–Prisoner Ratio and Institutional Care

The researchers discovered that the female staff in prisons, especially the warders and healthcare staff, were in acute shortage. This disparity limited the possibility of good supervision, surveillance, and responsive care. Women prisoners also complained about the lack of interaction with female staff, and this had a negative impact on their feeling of security, particularly at night and during emergencies. Lack of proper female staff also curtailed access to counselling, redressing of grievances, and gender sensitive supervision (Paul, 2025)<sup>[14]</sup>.

### Legal Status and Access to Justice

There was a preponderant representation of under-trial prisoners, which attributes to inefficiencies in the investigation, bail, and trial procedures used by the system. It was stated that many women lacked or did not have access to regular or legal representation, and legal aid services were either ineffective or inaccessible. Ignorance of the law also increased delays, and led to longer sentences being spent in prison, even though an individual may be paying bail or on early release (Kulshrestha, 2025)<sup>[15]</sup>.

### Health and Healthcare Services

Although there were basic medical services, the quality and frequency of healthcare were still skewed. Problems of physical health, such as anaemia, problems in reproductive health, and chronic illnesses, were rife. More importantly, mental health demands were not given much attention and had little access to counselling or psychiatric treatment. The emotional distress, anxiety, and depression were also common phenomena, of which the institutional response was seldom provided (Plugge *et al.*, 2011)<sup>[16]</sup>.

### Quality of Life Assessment

Across WHOQOL-BREF domains, women prisoners reported moderate to low Quality of Life.

- Physical health scores reflected fatigue, sleep disturbances, and inadequate nutrition.
- Psychological well-being was adversely affected by uncertainty of trial, separation from family, and lack of emotional support.
- Social relationships were constrained by limited visitation and disrupted familial roles.
- Environmental conditions, including sanitation, ventilation, and overcrowding, significantly reduced overall well-being.

### Autonomy, Safety, and Dignity

The results show a very restrictive custody environment that has little autonomy. Movements could not move freely, personal privacy was minimal, surveillance was omnipresent, and it jeopardized personal dignity. Different forms of invisibility and powerlessness were caused by the absence of personal control and discretion of institutions, although the explicit violence was not widespread.

### Motherhood and Childcare in Prison

Institutional deficiencies were apparent with incarcerated mothers having children. As the laws identify the rights of

children, childcare centres, feeding, and development services were inadequate. Women reported that they were anxious about the future of their children, exposing the way imprisonment has intergenerational effects beyond the individual criminal (Gharagozloo *et al.*, 2025)<sup>[17]</sup>.

### Discussion

The empirical evidence in this paper highlights a continuing lack of correspondence between the theoretical normative body of law regulating the rights of prisoners and the actualities of women who are in the social context of Haryana jails. Although the principles of the constitution, the legislation, and judicial decisions officially accept the equality and dignity of inmates, there is still little projecting it on a normal custodianship practice. According to the socio-legal evidence, rights in prison are less felt as statutory rights and privileges and rather as conditional ones, created according to the institutional forces and administrative goodwill. An overcrowded condition occurs as one of the key structural reasons that generate gendered harm. Even though women make up a smaller percentage of the population in prisons, overcrowding in women's enclosures sets disproportional effects in that women lack privacy and hygiene, and experience more psychological stress. Feminist penology points out that it is a situation where women are impacted differently by using the conditions through caregiving roles, health needs, and vulnerability to emotional distress (Bucerius & Sandberg, 2022)<sup>[18]</sup>. The results indicate that overcrowding not only contravenes expectations established in judicial interventions but also determines the dignity of women by making it a normal state of deprivation. The research also indicates a structural denial of justice, especially when it comes to undertrial imprisonment and the right to access legal services. The preponderance of undertrial women prisoners indicates internal lapses in the practice of bail, legal awareness, and institutional legal provision, which do not conform to Article 39A of the Constitution. In socio-legal terms, a drawn-out period of undertrial detention is punishment without conviction, which is also unequally burdensome to the women amongst the economically and socially disadvantaged. Theory on human dignity and carceral governance can be used to understand how imprisonment systems with a control-related orientation focus on controlling the prisoners rather than their well-being. It is evident through the Quality of Life assessment that physical safety is not humane custody, but dignity, autonomy, and psychological well-being are the features of substantive justice. The argument in the discussion that the incarceration of women in India must be reconsidered using a gender-sensitive, rights-based approach to support the idea that structural inequalities exist within the confines of the penal system will be reinforced through an empirical evidence-based, legal, and theoretical approach to discussing it.

### Policy Implications and Recommendations

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### Conclusion

This paper has explored the rights and the Quality of Life of women inmates in Haryana prisons in the socio-legal empirical framework, indicating a differentiated ambiguity in legal guarantee and conviction aspects. The results indicate that overcrowding, staffing, poor access to legal advice, poor healthcare, and less autonomy are all detrimental threats to the dignity and welfare of women in the prison environment. Although this is supported by the constitutional protection and the liberal actions of the judicial field, the incarceration of women today is still subject to the institutionalized pattern that is largely gender-neutral in its design, and gendered in its consequences. The study has been added to the prisons jurisprudence because it works ahead of Quality of Life in its substantive human rights indicator in custody. The combination of empirical research with legal and theoretical analysis helps the study to address rather narrow notions of prisoners' rights in terms of physical safety or procedural legality. It highlights the necessity to re-conceptualise imprisonment as the lived experience that has been defined by dignity, autonomy, and institutional care, especially among the marginalised women. The research provides opportunities to pursue

further studies as well. Comparative research among states would help to understand the differences in the way prisons are managed in different regions, whereas longitudinal studies might help to trace the transformations in female well-being throughout the sentence. This would be further enhanced by further investigation into children who reside with imprisoned mothers and the post-release reintegration to gain deeper insight into the intergenerational effects of women's imprisonment. Finally, the combination of long-term empirical work, intent to act, and the policy of penal services on reforming the system to focus on justice, care, and equality is crucial in supporting the rights of women prisoners.

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