

Introduction

Female crime, the position of women in criminal proceedings, and especially in prison, have long been neglected topics, remaining on the peripheries of discussion, both in theory and practice. This has always been justified by the fact that women constitute a small portion of the convicted population, and an even smaller share of the total prison population worldwide (Aebi et al., 2022; Fair & Walmsley, 2022). As a result, there has been insufficient focus on the specificities of female crime compared to male crime, inadequate understanding of the pathways that lead women into criminal behaviour, and neglect of the specific needs and requirements of female convicts once they find themselves behind the bars.

An important step in shedding light on these issues was taken by feminist-oriented criminologists during the 1980s, who brought to the fore issues of female crime on one hand and violence against women on the other, also pointing to their interconnection (Gehring, 2016; Barberet & Jackson, 2017; Nikolić-Ristanović & Konstantinović Vilić, 2018; Russel et al, 2020; Quiroga-Carrillo, Ferraces Otero, Lorenzo Moledo, 2024). They highlighted, and later research confirmed, that women in prison constitute a particularly vulnerable social group (Nuytiens & Christiaens, 2012; Pavićević, 2020). Their vulnerability delves from the unique pathways women take to crime and their broader societal roles, which includes four key dimensions: the history of violent victimization, relationship issues, mental health problems, and substance abuse (Bloom, Owen, & Covington, 2003).

However, as pointed out in the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders, prison facilities are designed primarily to address the needs of male prisoners, leaving needs of female convicts unmet, which negatively impacts women's mental and physical health, well-being, and welfare; consequently, decreasing the quality of prison life for incarcerated women. Nevertheless, during the past three decades there has been an increasing interest in female crime and the position of imprisoned women. We believe that this edited volume will present a valuable contribution to the emerging literature that focuses on female perspectives on incarceration, tracing further paths to go beyond traditional, male-centred approaches in correctional institutions.

The idea behind this edited volume, which originated within the framework of the PrisonLIFE project, was to address the position, treatment, rights, and quality of life of female prisoners in Serbia and globally. We wanted to explore the impact of imprisonment on women, their perception of the prison environment, living conditions, and treatment programs within female prisons. Additionally, we intended to examine potential variations in the perception of the quality of prison life and other factors between male and female inmates. In general, contributors to this volume explore specificities of female criminality and imprisonment; provide insights into the adverse effects of imprisonment on women, exploring the unique challenges they face while incarcerated, and delve into how female

inmates adapt to the prison environment and treatment programs, shedding light on their experiences and needs.

The contributions in this volume draw on the narrative, systematic, and state-of-the-art literature reviews, on the one hand, and the original empirical research that explore how women in different countries perceive the prison environment and the quality of life behind the bars, on the other. Contributors examine various dimensions of the quality of prison life, which affects not only women's life in prison, but also their lives after release. The quality of prison life is one of the latest concepts of prison research, which unambiguously distinguishes between the prison system as an exclusive means of punishment and as a resocialization resource (Ilijić, Milićević, Pavićević, 2022; Ćopić, Stevanović, Vujičić, 2024; Pavićević, Ilijić, Batrićević, 2024). Additionally, the quality of prison life is one of the decisive factors in the effectiveness of the custodial sentence and educational and correctional treatment in prison. It includes several key dimensions: professionalism, living conditions, family contacts, personal well-being and development, harmony, and security within prison settings, some of them being explored in the contributions to this volume.

The volume is divided into three thematic parts. Part I delves into the global perspectives on diverse issues related to the female prison life. It starts with a thorough literature review written by Milena Milićević, who focuses on exploring prison systems for female convicts in the East and the West, focusing on understanding the complex aspects of women's lives in prisons globally and the unique challenges they face, trying to explain similarities and differences in female experiences of imprisonment in developed and developing countries. Although differences in female experiences of imprisonment between developed and developing nations are visible, particularly in respect to living conditions, healthcare access, and rehabilitation programs, and women in prisons in general face mental health problems, the author points out a growing international recognition of the need for gender-responsive prison systems and collaboration with community support systems. This is estimated as a positive development, which contributes to better reintegration of female convicts, while examples of good practice discussed in the chapter are valuable sources for further work on the improvement of women's position in prisons, particularly in developing countries.

Sanja Petkovska brings an interesting insight into the perception of prisons in the writings of women political prisoners. She demonstrates the reasons why prison writings produced by the women imprisoned for political reasons are a useful source for understanding both short- and long-term impact that prison has on the lives of the current and former inmates. This chapter also demonstrates how materials produced in prisons are beneficial research material and a source of information about how imprisoned individuals process the experience of incarceration and the prisons themselves, which is also useful for better understanding of perceived quality of prison life and social climate in prisons. The author first classified writings of imprisoned women into the two main historical periods, with taking the World War II as a demarcation line, and then delved into criminological and penological analysis of perspectives of prison on the one hand, and the perceptions of imprisonment, on the other, trying to point out how the imprisonment affected consequent wellbeing and political career and engagement of women imprisoned for political crimes.

Two chapters bring to the fore two sides of the maternity deprivation coin: the motherhood of imprisoned female convicts and trauma prison brings in this respect, on one side, and the position of children of incarcerated mothers, who are particularly vulnerable, on the other. Based on a rapid systematic review, Milica Kovačević, Marina Kovačević-Lepojević, Branislava Popović-Čitić and Lidija Bukvić explore the status of children of incarcerated parents, primarily mothers, who are often referred to as 'orphans of justice' and 'forgotten victims' of crime, not only in policy and practice, but also in research and academic writings. The authors point out to a bulk of adverse effects of parents' incarceration and significant and far-reaching consequences for children, who often belonged to disadvantaged groups even before their parents were incarcerated, while the negative consequences of imprisoning a mother are more profound compared to the consequences of imprisoning a father. In order to reduce negative impact of parental incarceration on the child's welfare, different programs and strategies could be undertaken. Some examples of good practice and parenting in prisons are discussed in the chapter.

Violeta Tadić and Boris Kordić continue the discussion on the same topic, emphasizing how early traumatic experiences and problems in the life of mothers can change the quality of mother-child attachment and affect later growth and development. They explore the two sides of the same coin: negative effect of incarceration on women's maternal role, since deprivation of maternity is seen as one of the strongest deprivations female convicts face behind the bars. On the other side, imprisonment of mothers can disrupt the early mother-child relationship and negatively affect the quality of attachment, which is a significant source of trauma for children and has a negative impact on their upbringing and future socio-emotional and psychological development. Consequently, as the authors discuss, there is a need for more responsive programs that will offer support to mothers, both during imprisonment and after release, in order to make them to be good enough mothers and provide the child with conditions for optimal growth and development.

The last chapter in the first part of the book is written by Zorica Mršević, who explores systematic violation of women's human rights in prisons, which is based on four cases studies: rebellion in the Northern Irish prison of Armagh, Honduras - riots in women's prisons with several killed inmates, China – Sinkiang prison for Ujgur women, and Transgender (trans women) persons in prisons. These examples present drastic cases of systematic violations of women's human rights, which are discussed against general social and political situation in the countries where they were located. Imprisoned women face a multitude of challenges globally, many of which are deeply rooted in gender inequality, poverty, discrimination, and inadequate social support systems. Gender-specific risks and vulnerabilities are mentioned in all analysed cases, while, as the author points, transgender and gender non-conforming individuals may face additional challenges and risks related to their gender identity.

Part II of the volume brings regional perspectives and insights in the status of women in prisons, turning our attention to the situation in Slovenian, Croatian and North Macedonian prisons for female convicts. This part starts with insights into the position of female convicts in Slovenia. The chapter written by Eva Bertok brings an overview of the position of women in prison in Slovenia through the last 80 years - the Ig Prison, which is the only prison for

convicted adult women, regardless of the length of imprisonment. After providing a brief history of the Ig prison and an overview of the so far conducted research on the position of female convicts in Slovenia, she turns to the results of the longitudinal research on social climate in Slovenian prisons, focusing on the Ig prison, which started in 1980 providing comparable data. The author argues on the relevance of such research since favourable social climate created in prisons by both employees and convicts is a pre-condition for the well-being of both, which on the other hand impacts positive effects of the treatment program and increases feasibility of reintegration and reduction of recidivism.

Gorazd Meško and Rok Hacin focus on the comparison of perceived legitimacy and relations between female and male prisoners in prisons in Slovenia. Based on the findings of the empirical study conducted on a national sample of prisoners in Slovenia, the authors analyse differences between female and male prisoners' perceptions of legitimacy, arguing that it exists, but that it is not profound. As pointed out, imprisoned men are less willing to obey prison workers, which can be seen as a consequence of more intense internalisation of subcultural norms. On the other hand, female prisoners are more willing to obey prison workers, and are less inclined towards prison subculture. The authors conclude that the quality of treatment of prisoners is invariant in all Slovenian prisons, but it would be important to further explore the impact of the social environment in order to determine various factors that influence prisoners' perception of legitimacy.

Alina Bezljaj and Darja Tadič shed light on the intricate interplay between violence and social relations in a (female) prison, basing their discussion on the assumption that violence is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather arises from an interplay of various group dynamics. They discuss how distrust functions as a unique "engagement with the world" and a survival strategy within the prison context. Their observations are based on an in-depth analysis of the interpersonal dynamics associated with violence in Slovenia's female correctional institution - Ig Prison. The authors concluded that the culture of distrust, which is present in the Ig Prison, significantly affects the dynamics of violence in various ways. Therefore, interventions that have to address prison violence have to be tightly linked to changes in prison culture.

Irma Kovčo Vukadin and Martina Pleško analyse the implementation of human rights laws and standards for female prisoners in the Croatian prison system, assessing current practice with special focus on the Bangkok Rules. Based on the official crime and prison statistics, they firstly portray female offenders and prisoners in the Croatian penal system, focusing on the trend in reporting, charging and convicting women, the structure of female criminality, and the structure and some basic characteristics of imprisoned women, who serve prison sentence in only one prison for female offenders in Požega. They proceed with arguing whether the Law on Enforcement of Prison Sentence is gender-sensitive, and to what extent is it aligned with the Bangkok Rules. Finally, when it comes to the situation regarding the rights of female prisoners from the perspective of national and international protection and monitoring bodies, albeit positive moves, some problems still exist, such as negative effects of overcrowding, the insufficient co-operation between the Ministry responsible for the penitentiary sentences and the one responsible for health care, and the inadequate application of mechanisms for the protection of prisoners' rights.

Vesna Stefanovska and Nataša Peovska analyse female offenders in the criminal justice system in the Republic of North Macedonia. Based on the official crime and prison statistics and research studies conducted in North Macedonia in the last five years, they examine patterns of female criminality, types of female crimes, the link between victimisation and later criminal behaviour, and causes of female crime. Additionally, they explore the patterns of arrest, sentencing and incarceration of women offenders compared to male counterparts, as well as the dynamic and trends of those patterns during a five-year period. Finally, they pay due attention to certain socio-demographic features of women prisoners that were obtained through access and review of women prisoner's files.

Dragana Batic, Dimitrinka Jordanova Peševska, and Tiana Ivanovska introduce the readers to the results of the empirical study on physical and mental health of women prisoners in the only women's prison in the Republic of North Macedonia - "Idrizovo" prison. The study also delved into the overall health and mental health care and services delivered to the women in prison as well as the conditions of the environment, food and hygiene, which are important aspects of the quality of prison life. The results of this qualitative study suggest that female convicts have problems with their health in general, and mental health, in particular. Separation from the family, especially children is perceived as the greatest stressor. Female prisoners use different emotional and social strategies to cope with the stress, while cognitive strategy is not used enough due to the feeling of isolation and impossibility to influence their life conditions. The authors conclude on importance of improving physical and mental health of imprisoned women, which is a precondition for the improvement of their overall well-being, and thus, the quality of life while in prison, but also upon release.

Part III of the volume focuses on the diverse perspectives of female crime, female convicts and quality of prison life in Serbia. It starts with the chapter written by Sanja Čopić, who highlights the specificities of female crime and the pathways that lead women into crime, arguing that changes in the dynamics and the structure of women's crime are in line with societal changes and especially changes in women's position in the society, although they still reflect gender socialization, the needs determined by the society, and the place allocated to women in the social division of labour. She also focuses on the status of women in the only prison for female convicts in Serbia – Correctional Institution for Women in Požarevac, shedding light on the past, present, and future of women's imprisonment, pointing to positive changes, but also to possible improvements of the quality of life of female convicts, arguing for broader application of community sanctions.

Ana Batrićević and Slađana Jovanović focus their analysis on the treatment programmes for female prisoners in Serbia, which are of immense relevance for effective resocialization and further reintegration of women. They argue that treatment of female offenders has been an extremely neglected area throughout history; consequently, treatment programs for female prisoners are rather limited in number, and the existing ones derived from, and were developed on the grounds of programs originally created for male offenders. Thus, they are often not gender-sensitive, but rather based on stereotypical assumptions about female crime and female convicts, neglecting specificities of women crime and women's pathways to crime. Based on the empirical findings, the authors provide a profound insight into treatment

programmes that are implemented in the only prison for female convicts in Serbia, highlight key challenges that emerge therein, and suggest ways to overcome them in the future.

Based on the findings of the research on quality of prison life in Serbia, implemented within the PrisonLIFE project, Olivera Pavićević analyses how female convicts in Serbia experience different aspects of well-being and development while incarcerated, and discusses various factors that impact the levels of their personal autonomy and personal development. The research suggested that female prisoners estimated the dimension of well-being significantly lower than both personal development and personal autonomy. This suggests that female inmates may perceive feelings of pain, punishment, and tension associated with incarceration more intensely compared to their engagement in activities related to personal growth and preparation for release and reintegration, as well as their sense of agency and self-determination within the prison environment. As the author argues, personal autonomy in the prison context is seen as a precondition for personal development and growth, serving the purpose of attaining well-being and transforming the identities of convicted individuals towards non-criminals, while personal development involves unlocking the potential of convicted individuals, helping them to overcome obstacles and barriers in life and prevent them from reoffending, but also from victimization, which is also one of the factors of female crime.

Imprisonment has adverse effects on women, particularly on their mental health. This is pointed out in the chapter by Ljeposava Ilijić, who argues that women in prison have disproportionately higher levels of health (both physical and mental) and social needs compared to male prisoners and women in general population. A large number of imprisoned women live with trauma, which plays a critical role in explaining gender differences in mental health in prison, but also in substance abuse. Taking these observations as a starting point, the author analyses the data from the PrisonLIFE research on the quality of prison life focusing on healthcare needs and treatment of women in prison in Serbia.

With the topics discussed in the contributions, this book offers valuable insights for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. It opens the floor for new research and serves as a foundation for evidence-based reforms in legislation, policy, and practice. Policymakers can find ideas and recommendations for improving the status of female prisoners and the overall quality of prison life. Furthermore, it guides practitioners toward more individualised, gender-sensitive, and holistic approaches to female inmates and their treatment, facilitating their life in prison and reintegration into society upon release. Finally, the book certainly turns attention to the need for broader utilisation of community sanctions for female offenders, aligning with the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders, which may assist in overcoming numerous problems that arise from incarcerating women.

We would like to thank all the authors of the chapters in this volume for delving deeper into the topic of female convicts and imprisonment and providing such valuable contributions for making female crime and the position of women in prisons more visible. We also owe gratitude to the reviewers for their time and willingness to read the chapters and provide their evaluation. We are deeply convinced that this book will serve its purpose

and will add to the efforts in Serbia and the region, but even broader, to improve overall position of female convicts in the prison system.

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