Punishing the margins: women in Swiss prisons

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, the global prison population grew significantly, with a 60% increase among women, compared to 20% for men (Penal Reform International & Thailand Institute of Justice, 2023). In Switzerland, the trend is even more pronounced, between 2015 and 2023, the incarceration rate for women rose by 39.7%, and 3.4% for men (Federal Statistical Office, 2024).

Nevertheless, women remain a minority, just 6.9% of the global prison population and 5.7% in Switzerland, contributing to their systemic invisibility in carceral policy, public discourse, and institutional practices.

The penal system, primarily designed around male profiles and needs, often fails to account for gender-specific experiences and requirements (Constanty, 2018a). Therefore, incarcerated women face a double punishment, they are punished for their crime and confined in conditions that further their vulnerabilities (Constanty, 2018a). Overcrowding; with occupancy rates of 132% at Champ-Dollon and 166% at Bois-Mermet (swissinfo.ch, 2025), understaffing (Fischer et al., 2022), and limited access to healthcare, education, and vocational training disproportionately affect women, particularly in facilities not designed for female populations (Sohy, 2024). These challenges are exacerbated by policy decisions such as the closure of a women's prison in the canton of Geneva in 2014 due to cost concerns, despite the ongoing increase in female incarceration rates (Constanty, 2018b).

Incarcerated women also have distinct health and psychosocial needs that remain largely unmet. Rates of severe psychiatric disorders affect 35% of female detainees, and nearly 60% are at high risk of suicide (Eck et al., 2025). Yet only a small proportion of these women receive appropriate mental health care, while many are overmedicated, often without adequate therapeutic support. A significant portion also face compounded physical health challenges; nearly one-third of incarcerated women were overweight or obese at the time of entry, and longitudinal data show a deterioration in their health status during incarceration (Augsburger et al., 2022).

This report investigates the root causes of these systemic disparities and examines how the intersection of gender, institutional design, and social marginalization shapes the incarceration conditions of women.

Methodology

Our research draws on diverse sources, combining academic literature from various disciplines with media analyses, civil society reports, and insights from practitioners. Additionally, we conducted semi-structured interviews with the director of a prison in Switzerland, personnel responsible for vocational training offers in another Swiss prison, a journalist and a lawyer working closely with our target population, a United Nations employee who worked on the issue of children

deprived of liberty and visited detention facilities in various countries, and founders of a Swiss NGO assisting former detainees in their rehabilitation. This multidisciplinary and multi-perspective approach provided a nuanced understanding of women's incarceration, grounded in real-life experiences. It further enabled us to apply systems thinking to identify how institutional interactions perpetuate structural patterns within the penal and carceral system.

I. Patriarchal structures and their impact on women's incarceration

Women's incarceration occurs within a penal and carceral system historically built around male norms (Nederlandt & Gauthier, 2022). As a numerical minority, women often face conditions that overlook their specific needs (Association for the Prevention of Torture, 2024). This can be observed through vocational programs that prepare them for lower-paid, traditionally female-dominated jobs, more restricted access to healthcare and mental health services, and greater regulation of their bodies and behaviors (Sohy, 2024). These dynamics reinforce existing social inequalities and can hinder both rehabilitation and reintegration (UNODC, 2024).

A. Unfair and biased regulations

Patriarchal, legal and cultural norms continue to shape expectations around women's behavior and influence how female criminality is interpreted (Dhiman, 2022). When women deviate from traditional ideals, such as purity, gentleness, or maternal duty, their actions are often judged not only as criminal but also as moral failings (Rostaing, 2017a).

Some laws disproportionately impact women by targeting behaviors linked to gender norms. These include restrictions on clothing (e.g., burka bans), limits on reproductive rights (e.g., anti-abortion laws), and the criminalization of certain jobs that are predominantly held by women, such as sex work (Penal Reform International & Women Beyond Walls, 2025). Such laws impose behavioural conformity through punishment, without considering the broader social and economic realities many women face.

Justice systems also apply inconsistent standards. While some women may receive lighter sentences based on perceptions of passivity or non-violence, those who commit offenses that defy gender norms, such as violent acts or harm to children, often face harsher penalties than men in similar situations (Society for Personality and Social Psychology, 2018; Nederlandt & Gauthier, 2022). These discrepancies highlight the influence of gender stereotypes in shaping judicial outcomes.

B. Hegemonic masculinity in carceral structures

Prison systems follow the model of hegemonic masculinity, where male behaviors and needs serve as the institutional norm (Nederlandt & Gauthier, 2022). Originally designed for male offenders, prisons still function around their needs and experiences, marginalizing both incarcerated women and female staff (Constanty, 2018; Ricciardelli & McKendy, 2020).

In mixed-gender prisons, this marginalization is visible in the unequal distribution of space and resources. Men generally have access to larger communal areas like gymnasiums or outdoor spaces that support physical movement and social interaction. Women, in contrast, are often confined to smaller, under-equipped sections with limited opportunities to maintain their health or mental well-being through physical activity (Wernaers, 2023). This reflects a bias that assumes such needs are primarily male concerns.

Gendered logic also governs prison staffing. Although men and women are recruited for the same work, task allocation remains strongly gendered in practice (Ricciardelli & McKendy, 2020). Women are frequently excluded from security-related duties or restricted from high-risk zones, under paternalistic assumptions from their male colleagues that they are "too fragile" for such work (Cardi et al., 2024). These assumptions not only limit women's professional opportunities but also undermine their authority and legitimacy.

Furthermore, women working in prisons routinely face gender-based discrimination, including sexist remarks, harassment, and the questioning of their competences (Cardi et al., 2024). These dynamics reinforce the image of prisons as male-dominated environments, places where women are allowed, but not genuinely needed, and often treated as marginal or secondary actors.

II. Capitalist structures and the criminalization of precarity

There is a strong link between economic precarity and incarceration (Penal Reform International & Women Beyond Walls, 2025). The penal system is increasingly used as a response to social and economic inequality, disproportionately impacting marginalized and precarious populations (Jennequin et al., 2024). According to Doffiny and André (2022), over 90% of incarcerated individuals were unemployed before detention, highlighting how poverty and criminalization are deeply intertwined.

Many incarcerated women are mothers or primary caregivers, often convicted for non-violent, survival-related economic offenses such as theft or fraud (Jaquier & Vuille, 2017; Ghica & Jaquier, 2019). Financial vulnerability: such as an inability to pay legal fees or fines, furthers their risk of incarceration. As poverty becomes increasingly feminized, women face heightened exposure to both economic hardship and penal punishment (Penal Reform International & Thailand Institute of Justice, 2023).

A. Retreat of social support and neoliberal shifts

The incarceration of economically marginalized women reflects broader policy shifts under neoliberalism (Jennequin et al., 2024). Welfare systems have been scaled back in favor of individual responsibility models, framing poverty as a personal failure rather than a systemic issue (Kaminski, 2010).

As support structures erode, incarceration emerges as a short-term, cost-efficient tool for managing socio-economic inequality (Amado et al., 2024). Though ineffective at solving structural problems, it provides quick, quantifiable outcomes. In Switzerland, this is echoed in media and political narratives focused on public security, where calls for harsher penalties often overshadow social solutions (Amado et al., 2024). While such policies appear neutral, they disproportionately impact women, who are overrepresented among the economically vulnerable (Association for the Prevention of Torture, 2024; Johnson, 2025).

This shift in public policy has altered how marginalized individuals are viewed, less as people needing support, and more as problems to be monitored and controlled (Johnson, 2025). Incarceration is often used as a quick, lower-cost response to socio-economic issues, even though it does not address their root causes (Amado et al., 2024). In Switzerland, this logic is visible in political and media narratives centred on public security. Punitive measures are prioritized over social support, reinforcing inequalities. While penal policies may appear neutral, they disproportionately impact women, who are overrepresented among the economically vulnerable (Association for the Prevention of Torture, 2024; Johnson, 2025).

B. Prison as a space of remediation

Although portrayed as rehabilitative, the prison system struggles to offer appropriate tools for sustainable reintegration. Upon release, women often face financial insecurity compounded by stigma, which limits their employment opportunities and is further aggravated by debts incurred during incarceration (Amado et al., 2024; Emprechtinger et al., 2024).

Prison may provide their first access to structured education or vocational programs (Salane, 2021). These can foster self-confidence and skills (Sourie & Ferlazzo, 2023), but training options for women remain narrow and often reinforce traditional gender roles (Sohy, 2024). Programs typically focus on domestic tasks, sectors with low pay and limited advancement. In contrast, men more often access training in technical trades linked to higher employment demand and wages (Morash & Kashy, 2022).

As a result, women leave prison with limited tools to improve their socio-economic status and face the same structural vulnerabilities that may have contributed to their incarceration in the first place (Emprechtinger et al., 2024).

III. Lack of understanding and the invisibility of incarcerated women

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Incarcerated women are underrepresented and misunderstood within institutional settings, academic research, and public discourse (Eck et al., 2025). Their marginalization is shaped by systemic neglect, limited gender-sensitive data, and enduring stereotypes, resulting in penal practices that inadequately respond to their specific needs.

In prison, women are often perceived as less threatening, leading to under-supervision and expectations of self-regulation. Far from promoting autonomy, this can increase vulnerability, especially in understaffed or mixed-gender settings (Doffiny & André, 2022). Many women experience mental distress or are medicated, weakening their capacity to advocate for themselves. The fear of being transferred far from support networks due to the limited number of facilities for women, further silences protest, limiting institutional awareness of their needs (Chabrier et al., 2023).

Media and institutional discourse often emphasize women as victims of structural or interpersonal violence (Gender.Study, 2024). While these issues persist, the dominant focus on women as victims contributes to the invisibilization and lack of knowledge towards female detainees. Those who commit violent or atypical offenses are rarely depicted with nuance, deepening their exclusion from public and policy attention (Gender.Study, 2024; Kayser, 2023).

A. Androcentrism in research and policy

The prison system and penal research largely revolve around male experiences, treating women as statistical outliers (Rostaing, 2017a). Since men constitute the majority of the prison population, they serve as the default subject in carceral studies and institutional design. Therefore, women's incarceration has been framed as an exception, explored separately through niche or gender-specific frameworks rather than an integral part of broader penal debates (Eck et al., 2025; Rostaing, 2017b).

Research on rehabilitation, prison conditions, and recidivism is rarely designed to capture gendered experiences, and gender-disaggregated data is scarce (Eck et al., 2025). Without this data, policymakers are ill-equipped to develop measures that reflect women's specific needs. Moreover, initiatives for women are chronically underfunded and sidelined from both justice and feminist agendas (Cordua & Mahtani, 2021; Penal Reform International & Thailand Institute of Justice, 2023).

B. Biased media representation

Media portrayals of female incarceration are rare, often distorted or absent (Easteal et al., 2015). While most women are incarcerated for non-violent, poverty-related offenses, media narratives tend to sensationalize rare violent offenses (Doffiny & André, 2022. This emphasis on the exceptional obscures the structural realities behind most incarcerations.

When their stories are told, women are framed either as victims or anomalies. Rarely do media accounts contextualize criminal acts in terms of economic hardship, caregiving responsibilities, or gendered life trajectories. This limited framing reinforces stereotypes and reduces public empathy for women in prison (Sourie & Ferlazzo, 2023).

This narrow framing of female incarceration limits public understanding, weakens support for reform, and allows carceral institutions to persist without addressing the specific experiences of women (Cordua & Mahtani, 2021).

IV. Understanding the existing solutions landscape

Despite growing awareness, responses to female incarceration remain fragmented and largely ineffective at addressing the structural factors that make imprisonment particularly harmful for women.

At the global level, the 2010 Bangkok Rules, adopted by Switzerland in 2013, promote gender-sensitive detention and alternatives to incarceration. Yet, as non-binding soft law, they lack enforcement mechanisms and have limited practical impact (UNODC, 2011; Constanty, 2018b). Similarly, recommendations by the Council of Europe's Anti-Torture Committee to reduce prison populations have seen little implementation in Switzerland (CPT, 2025), as penal reform remains politically slow and structurally difficult.

At the local level, including national and cantonal, some measures aim to address overcrowding, including alternative sanctions like community service, electronic monitoring or transferring detainees to other cantons (État de Vaud, 2025). However, these strategies often focus on the general (male-dominated) population, with little adaptation for women. Reintegration initiatives, including vocational workshops aligned with market needs, have been introduced, but without mechanisms to ensure accessibility for women, who frequently face structural and logistical barriers to participation.

Moreover, some women have been able to participate in activities typically reserved for male detainees, demonstrating that access can be improved with proper planning and safeguards (Jennequin et al., 2024; Kayser, 2023). However, such efforts remain isolated and politically sensitive due to ongoing debates around gender-mixed settings.

Civil society efforts, like those of REPR, primarily support detainees' families, indirectly aiding women, especially mothers. Yet, broader psychosocial needs often go unmet. Feminist funding and advocacy around incarceration remain marginal, as carceral issues are frequently deprioritized in women's rights agendas (Cordua & Mahtani, 2021).

Thus, current responses are mostly symbolic, generalist, or underfunded. Without sustained political will, targeted policies, and gender-specific approaches, the root causes of women's penal and carceral vulnerability will persist.

V. Identification of levers of change and intervention opportunity

Addressing the systemic harms of female incarceration requires coordinated reforms across legal, institutional, and societal levels.

A central priority is ensuring equitable access to education, vocational training, and recreational programs in detention. These initiatives must move beyond gendered stereotypes to include technical and digital skills, offering women real opportunities for post-release autonomy and economic reintegration. Expanding such programs challenges patriarchal assumptions while addressing the structural precarity that often precedes incarceration.

Equally important is the expansion of feminist funding, both for community organizations that support incarcerated women and for research that amplifies their lived experiences. Carceral issues remain underfunded within the broader women's rights agenda. Supporting participatory research and centring formerly incarcerated voices would help close persistent knowledge gaps and shape more effective policy. In tandem, public narratives must shift, greater visibility and media attention are needed to challenge stigma and promote a more nuanced understanding of women's paths to prison.

On a judicial level, broader use of non-custodial sanctions, such as community service or electronic monitoring, can provide more proportionate responses to non-violent, economically driven offenses. These alternatives are especially critical for women with caregiving roles, for whom incarceration has far-reaching social consequences.

Finally, global frameworks like the Bangkok Rules must be strengthened. Moving beyond symbolic endorsement to actual implementation, with accountability mechanisms, is essential to ensuring gender-sensitive justice. Only through multi-level, sustained engagement can detention systems become more equitable and responsive to the specific realities faced by women.

VI. Key insights, reflection and lessons learned

Initially, our project focused on the lack of access to training and activities for incarcerated women. But as our research progressed, it became clear that this issue is only one symptom of a much broader system shaped by patriarchy, economic inequality, and punitive justice policies. Women's imprisonment is not an isolated problem, it is deeply embedded in intersecting legal, institutional, and societal structures.

This realization taught us that complex problems cannot be tackled from a single angle. Each root cause we identified, was tied to the others. While this interconnection can feel overwhelming, it also opened our eyes to the potential for change. Understanding the system is the first step to developing targeted, well-designed interventions which can lead to meaningful progress.

A key lesson was the need to centre the voices of incarcerated women, who are often excluded from public and policy discussions, and left voiceless. Sustainable change demands collaboration across sectors, researchers, media, civil society, and institutions must work together to make these realities visible and actionable.

Working on this project transformed how we approach complex issues. We used systems thinking tools like stakeholder mapping, causal loop diagrams, and the iceberg model to better understand underlying dynamics. We came to understand that real change begins with knowledge, only by fully grasping the system can we act effectively and sustainably.

We are proud to have engaged with key stakeholders, uncovered structural causes, and helped bring attention to a neglected issue. Most importantly, we leave this project with a clear conviction, systemic change is complex, but it is both possible and urgently needed.

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