

## Perception of Security as One of the Central Dimensions of Prison Life Quality in the Correctional Institution for Women in Požarevac\*

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The main purpose of this paper was to highlight the importance of security as a dimension of the social climate for women who are deprived of their liberty and held in prisons, recognising the power dynamics between prison staff and women prisoners as a cornerstone of effective and humane execution of the prison sentence. Given the unique context of the execution of the prison sentence for women prisoners in Serbia, this paper presents the findings from research on the dimension of security conducted at the only prison in which women in Serbia serve the sentence of deprivation of liberty, the Correctional Institution for Women in Požarevac, in 2022. The sample consisted of 91 respondents from both the closed and semi-open sections of the facility. The research is part of a three-year project titled Assessment and possibilities for improving the quality of prison life of prisoners in the Republic of Serbia: Criminological-penological, psychological, sociological, legal and security aspects – the PrisonLIFE project, supported by the Science Fund under the Ideas 2020 programme, implemented by the Institute of Criminological and Sociological Research and the University of Belgrade – Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation.

**KEYWORDS:** security / quality of life / prison / women prisoners

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## Introduction

The security and safety of individuals deprived of their liberty are prerequisites for meeting other relevant standards and norms, and their provision requires respect for fundamental human rights and freedoms. This is of particular significance when considering female prisoners, and selected international instruments, such as the Bangkok Rules,<sup>2</sup> adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 21 December 2010, specifically address this issue. The Bangkok Rules recognise women prisoners as a particularly vulnerable social group, with distinct needs and requirements in comparison to male prisoners (Barberet & Jackson, 2017; Krabbe & Van Kempen, 2017).

In this context, a specific section of the Bangkok Rules pertains to issues of security and discipline, as security, safety, and discipline for all individuals in prison, as well as the recognition of the power dynamics between prison staff and women deprived of their liberty, are the cornerstones of an effective and humane prison system. The provision of external security (manifested in the prevention of escapes) and internal safety (which can be seen as an instrument to prevent disorder) is most effectively achieved by fostering positive relationships between persons deprived of their liberty and prison staff. The separation of women from men in prison, alongside the requirement for female staff to supervise women prisoners, serves to prevent violence and protect women prisoners from violence, abuse and harassment, and is a fundamental standard of human rights for prisoners.

Maintaining order and creating a secure environment for both prisoners and staff is one of the primary tasks of prison administration. The security and order depend on the professionalism of staff, particularly those in security roles, but also on the harmony within the prison, i.e., interpersonal relationships both between prisoners and between prisoners and staff. A sense of insecurity, experiences of violence and abuse, and fears of victimisation can undermine the well-being of convicted individuals, thereby impacting the overall quality of prison life (van Ginneken et al., 2018).

As previously noted, the Bangkok Rules pay particular attention to security and safety, insisting on the separation of women from men in prison. Given that body searches and intimate body searches can cause humiliation and distress, they insist on the adoption of alternative methods as a standard practice in penitentiary

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<sup>2</sup> Resolution of the United Nations General Assembly, A/RES/65/229, 65/229. United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules), available at [https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Bangkok\\_Rules\\_ENG\\_2203201\\_5.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Bangkok_Rules_ENG_2203201_5.pdf), page accessed on 12 November 2024.

institutions housing women deprived of their liberty. Children should never be subjected to intensive body searches.

Personal searches should be conducted in such a way as to ensure that women prisoners' dignity and respect are protected (Rules 19-21). These searches should only be carried out by female staff, who have received proper training in accordance with established procedures. There is also a strong emphasis on the development and implementation of alternative methods for body searches, such as scans, to avoid invasive body searches and minimise the harmful psychological and possible physical impact caused by such searches on women prisoners. Finally, as stated in Rule 21, prison staff shall demonstrate competence, professionalism and sensitivity, and shall preserve respect and dignity when searching for both children in prison with their mother and children visiting their mothers.

Rules 22 and 23 address disciplinary punishment. According to these rules, punishment by close confinement shall not be applied to mothers with children, pregnant women, and breastfeeding mothers. Furthermore, disciplinary sanctions for women prisoners shall not include a prohibition of family contact, especially with children (Kovačević et al., 2024). Instruments of restraint shall never be used on women during labour, during birth and immediately after birth. Finally, the rules provide for the protection of women who experience violence during their time in prison.

Security as a dimension of the social climate in prison includes four aspects of prison life: order and security, which imply a sufficient number of employees to ensure professional supervision and control of the prison environment. The subjective experience of the safety of convicted persons in the sense that they feel secure and protected from injuries, threats and other dangers. Adaptation of convicted persons to life in prison, which is seen through the need or coercion of the convicted person to join informal groups in prison. The last sub-dimension refers to the presence of drugs, abuse and victimization in the prison environment.

The main purpose of this paper was to emphasise the significance of security as a dimension of the social climate for women who are deprived of their liberty and are held in prisons, with an understanding of the specifics of the concept of safety and discipline, i.e., recognising the power dynamics between prison staff and women prisoners as a cornerstone of effective and humane execution of the prison sentence.

This paper is part of the wider three-year project titled *Assessment and possibilities for improving the quality of prison life of prisoners in the Republic of Serbia: Criminological-penological, psychological, sociological, legal and security aspects* – PrisonLIFE projekat, supported by the Science Fund under the Ideas 2020 programme, implemented by the Institute of Criminological and Sociological Research and the University of Belgrade – Faculty of Special

Education and Rehabilitation. The project, supported by the Science Fund through the Ideas 2020 programme, is conducted by the Institute of Criminological and Sociological Research and the University of Belgrade – Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation. The PrisonLIFE project focuses on the quality of prison life for individuals in Serbian prisons, affecting not only their lives within prison but also their life upon release (Ilijić et al., 2024), with security and its subdimensions being a central component of quality of life in prison for both male and female prisoners (Liebling, 2011; Milićević & Stevanović, 2024).

Among the first findings, those related to women prisoners serving their sentences at the Požarevac Correctional Facility for Women were published. The study analysed the quality of prison life for 91 women prisoners in Serbia, representing 40% of the female prison population in 2022, with the aim of assessing their overall experience, analysing differences in the quality of life across various categories and dimensions of the MQPL (Measuring the Quality of Prison Life; Mededović et al., 2024; Milićević et al., 2024), and identifying specific aspects of the prison environment that require improvement. Significant variations were found in the assessments of the prison climate. The findings indicate a relatively low overall quality of prison life, with a substantial proportion of respondents reporting a negative overall experience of life in prison. Only a small percentage expressed a positive view of the quality of prison life. However, relatively positive experiences were reported in the categories of *Conditions and Contact with Family, Harmony, and Security*. On the other hand, categories such as *Professionalism and Well-being and Development* received lower ratings in our sample, indicating areas for improvement. The highest-rated dimensions of MQPL were *Adaptation and Distress* (indicating lower levels of significant inner turmoil), while the lowest-rated were *Well-being, Bureaucratic Legitimacy, Organisation and Consistency, and Decency* (Batrićević et al., 2023). The complete dataset from the PrisonLIFE project is publicly available (Milićević et al., 2024).

### **Dimension of Security and Female Prisoner's Experiences**

The dimension of *security* is one of the determining dimensions of the quality of prison life. It encompasses several aspects (subdimensions): Security as a dimension of the social climate in prison includes four aspects of prison life: 1) policing and security, which implies a sufficient number of staff to ensure professional supervision and control of the prison environment, and 2) the subjective sense of safety of the convicted persons, meaning that they feel safe and protected from injury, threats, and other dangers. The third subdimension is the adaptation of convicted persons to life in prison, which is viewed through the necessity or coercion of the convicted person to join informal groups within the

prison. The final subdimension relates to the presence of drugs, abuse, and victimisation within the prison environment.

The respondents in the Correctional Institution for Women in Požarevac rated the security dimension with an average score of 3.02 ( $SD = 0.68$ ), with the lowest average score being 1.59 and the highest being 4.82. In other words, the average score for this dimension is at the threshold value, suggesting that the women prisoners involved in the research show a relatively positive attitude towards this dimension of the quality of prison life. The research confirmed significant differences between the four subdimensions of security: the security of the women prisoners ( $M = 3.08$ ) and the adaptation of women prisoners ( $M = 3.74$ ) were rated significantly better than the policing and security ( $M = 2.93$ ) and drugs and exploitation ( $M = 2.70$ ). Basically, *security* in the Correctional Facility for Women in Požarevac is a dimension that is relatively positively rated, but there is considerable room for improvement, especially in the subdimensions that fall below the threshold values (Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Rating of subdimensions within the dimension of security*

Items	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>N</i>
Policing and security	2.93	.68	1.67	5.00	91
Prisoner safety	3.08	.86	1.00	5.00	91
Prisoner adaptation	3.74	.92	1.00	5.00	91
Drugs and exploitation	2.70	.99	1.00	5.00	91
Security dimensions TOTAL SCORE	3.02	.66	1.59	4.82	91

### Subdimensions of security

As we have already indicated, the dimension of *Security* refers to: the *Policing and security* – Professional supervision and control of the prison environment (“This prison has too few employees”); the *Prisoner safety* – The feeling of safety and protection from injury, threats, or danger (“I don’t have problems with other prisoners here”); the *Prisoner Adaptation*– The need or pressure to join informal groups in the prison (“In this prison, you have to be part of a group to get by”); *Drugs and Exploitation* – The use of drugs, abuse, and victimisation in the prison environment (“Many people use drugs in this prison”).

The subdimension of the *Policing and safety* refers to the feeling that there is professional supervision and control of the prison environment. It was examined through nine statements, to which all the participants responded on a scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree) (Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Rating of the Policing and Security subdimension*

Policing and security	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>N</i>
The staff of this prison pretend not to see when the women prisoners break the prison rules.	2.77	1.36	1.00	5.00	90
Supervision over women prisoners is weak in this prison.	3.30	1.28	1.00	5.00	90
This prison is managed by women prisoners rather than employees.	3.20	1.27	1.00	5.00	91
In this prison, very little is done to prevent the introduction of drugs.	3.30	1.30	1.00	5.00	91
The staff in this prison are reluctant to oppose the prisoners.	3.50	1.12	1.00	5.00	90
There are many problems between different groups of women prisoners here.	2.30	1.15	1.00	5.00	91
In this prison, the law of the strongest applies among the prisoners.	2.07	1.14	1.00	5.00	90
This prison has far too few staff.	2.38	1.09	1.00	5.00	91
The staff respond quickly to incidents and alarms in this prison.	3.58	1.16	1.00	5.00	90

As mentioned above, the rating of the women prisoner’s experience related to the policing and safety is below the threshold value ( $M = 2.93$ ). At the same time, the women prisoners have a positive experience related to the statement that staff respond quickly to incidents and alarms in the prison ( $M = 3.58$ ), which is important for exercising the right to safety and security, as well as for the adherence to the established regulatory framework regarding the maintenance of safety and security in the prison. The following statements are above the threshold value: “Staff in this prison are reluctant to oppose the prisoners” ( $M = 3.50$ ); “Supervision over prisoners is weak in this prison” ( $M = 3.30$ ); and “This prison is managed by prisoners rather than employees” ( $M = 3.20$ ). An important finding was a relatively low score of the statement: “The staff of this prison pretend not to see when the prisoners break the prison rules” ( $M = 2.77$ ), which leads to the conclusion that respect of prison rules by employees is extremely important to women prisoners. When the score of this statement is compared to the score of the statement that is also below the threshold value, “This prison has far too few staff” ( $M = 2.38$ ), it is completely understandable that such an institution must have a sufficient number of staff to ensure professional supervision and control of the prison environment, as well as a sufficient number of people working in the treatment service (this point has been specifically emphasized by the Protector of Citizens through the National Mechanism for the Prevention of Torture in their reports). This is supported by the relatively negative experience of the prisoners regarding the statement: “There are many problems between different groups of prisoners here” ( $M = 2.30$ ), and especially the statement: “In this prison, the law of the strongest applies among the prisoners” ( $M = 2.07$ ).

The subdimension of *prisoner safety* refers to the positive and respectful attitude of the staff towards the prisoners. It was examined through five statements. On a scale of 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree), all participants responded to four statements ( $N = 91$ ), while two participants did not respond to one statement, “Generally speaking, I fear for my physical safety” (Table 3.). The overall rating of the participants regarding the subdimension of safety is slightly above the threshold value ( $M = 3.08$ ). In this regard, the prisoners particularly have a positive experience related to the statement: “I don’t have any problems with other prisoners here” ( $M = 3.58$ ).

**Table 3**

*Rating of the Safety of Women Prisoners Subdimension*

Safety of Women Prisoners	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>N</i>
I fear for my physical safety.	3.45	1.25	1.00	5.00	89
I feel safe here and I am not afraid that I will be harmed, abused, or threatened, or that other prisoners will endanger me.	2.95	1.39	1.00	5.00	91
I can relax and be myself among the other prisoners in this prison.	3.03	1.32	1.00	5.00	91
I must be on my guard with everyone in this prison (this applies to both other prisoners and staff).	2.32	1.30	1.00	5.00	91
I don’t have any problems with other prisoners here.	3.66	1.20	1.00	5.00	91

The subdimension of *prisoner adaptation* is the highest-rated subdimension of security. This finding indicates that many of the women prisoners do not feel the need or pressure to join informal groups in the prison, which can be assessed as a positive result. This subdimension was examined through three statements, all of which are above the threshold value (Table 4.). Specifically, the participants had a positive experience with the statement that they do not have to buy and sell things in prison to get by ( $M = 4.13$ ).

**Table 4**

*Rating of Subdimension: Prisoner Adaptation*

Prisoner adaptation	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>N</i>
To get by in this prison, I must buy and sell things.	4.13	1.10	1.00	5.00	91
It’s hard for me to avoid getting into debt in this prison.	3.79	1.36	1.00	5.00	89
In this prison, you must be part of a group to get by.	3.33	1.18	1.00	5.00	91

On the other hand, the use of drugs, abuse, and other forms of victimization in the prison environment are the lowest-rated – with a score of 2.70, thus below the threshold value. The obtained score suggests that the respondents show relatively negative experiences regarding the presence of drugs and abuse in the prison, indicating that this is a segment that requires special attention in the work of the

staff. Women prisoners have a particularly negative experience regarding the statements: “Some convicts have the main say in the sections of this prison” ( $M = 2.15$ ) and “Drugs cause numerous problems between prisoners here” ( $M = 2.57$ ), which are significantly below the threshold values (Table 5).

**Table 5**

*Rating of subdimension Drugs and exploitation*

Drugs and exploitation	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>N</i>
Drugs cause numerous problems between prisoners here.	2.57	1.31	1.00	5.00	91
Many prisoners use drugs in this prison.	3.07	1.37	1.00	5.00	90
There are many threats/abuses in this prison (by staff or prisoners).	3.05	1.22	1.00	5.00	91
In this prison, weaker prisoners are abused and mistreated (by other prisoners or staff).	2.64	1.30	1.00	5.00	91
Some convicts have the main say in the sections of this prison.	2.15	1.20	1.00	5.00	91

The presented results should be considered through the lens that the respondents involved in this study were exclusively from the closed and semi-open sections, and that most of the respondents were serving prison sentences for criminal offenses under Article 246 of the Criminal Code<sup>3</sup> – unlawful production and circulation of narcotics (30.8%). It is also worth noting that approximately one-fifth of the respondents committed some form of homicide, with aggravated murder under Article 114 of the Criminal Code and murder under Article 113 of the Criminal Code being the next most common criminal offenses. Additionally, it should be kept in mind that the study was conducted during a period of intensive construction work, which, by early 2027, should ensure the full alignment of the factual and normative framework.

The legal framework regulating the conduct of individuals serving prison sentences in Serbia is largely defined by the law and relevant by-laws. This includes relevant provisions from the Law on Execution of Criminal Sanctions<sup>4</sup> and three by-laws: the Rulebook on Disciplinary Proceedings against Convicted Persons,<sup>5</sup> the Rulebook on the Measures for Maintenance of Order and Security in Penitentiary Institutions,<sup>6</sup> and the Rulebook on Treatment, Treatment Program, Classification and Subsequent Classification of Prisoners.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Official Gazette RS*. No. 85/2005, 88/2005 – 107/2005 – 72/2009, 111/2009, 121/2012, 104/2013, 108/2014, 94/2016 i 35/2019.

<sup>4</sup> *Official Gazette RS*. No. 55/2014 and 35/2019.

<sup>5</sup> *Official Gazette RS*. No. 79/2014.

<sup>6</sup> *Official Gazette RS*. No. 55/14.

<sup>7</sup> *Official Gazette RS*. No. 66/2015.



## Conclusion

In modern society, there is an increasing awareness of the need to respect human rights, including the rights of convicted persons. It is evident that prisons have a significant impact on people's lives, and research has shown that the prison experience can have a profound and long-term effect on the physical and mental health, education, employment, and social connections of prisoners. Furthermore, research on life in prisons, such as the research conducted under the PrisonLIFE project, involves continually addressing numerous and complex challenges, including access to the prison population for security reasons, as well as many other ethical issues.

Maintaining order and creating a safe environment for both prisoners and staff is one of the primary responsibilities of prison administration. Security and order depend on the professionalism of the staff, particularly in the security service, but also on the harmony within the prison environment, that is, on interpersonal relationships, both among the prisoners and between the prisoners and staff. The dimension of *security* is one of the determining dimensions for the quality of prison life. It encompasses several aspects (subdimensions), and this paper presents the basic results on how the respondents in the Correctional Institution for Women in Požarevac, the only women's prison in Serbia, perceive this dimension and its subdimensions.

The respondents in the Correctional Institution for Women in Požarevac rated the dimension of security with an average score of 3.02 ( $SD = 0.68$ ), with the lowest average score being 1.59 and the highest 4.82. In other words, the average rating for this dimension is at the threshold value, and it can be concluded that the women prisoners included in the study show a relatively positive attitude toward this dimension of prison life quality. However, the research confirmed significant differences between the four subdimensions of security: the security of the women prisoners ( $M = 3.08$ ) and the adaptation of women prisoners ( $M = 3.74$ ) were rated significantly better than the policing and security ( $M = 2.93$ ) and drugs and exploitation ( $M = 2.70$ ). The presented results are part of a larger study, as previously mentioned, which analyzed the quality of prison life for 91 women prisoners in Serbia, representing 40% of the female prison population in 2022, with the aim of assessing their overall experience, analysing differences in the quality of life across various categories and dimensions of the MQPL (Measuring the Quality of Prison Life), and identifying specific aspects of the prison environment that require improvement. Significant variations were found in the assessments of the prison climate. The findings indicate a relatively low overall quality of prison life, with a substantial proportion of respondents reporting a negative overall experience of life in prison. Only a small percentage expressed a positive view of the quality of prison life. However, relatively positive

experiences were reported in the categories of *Conditions and Contact with Family, Harmony, and Security* (Batričević et al., 2023).

The presented results should be considered through the lens that the respondents involved in this study were exclusively from the closed and semi-open sections (and there is a limitation since the study did not include respondents from the open section). Additionally, majority of the respondents were serving prison sentences for criminal offenses under Article 246 of the Criminal Code – unlawful production and circulation of narcotics (30.8%). It is also worth noting that approximately one-fifth of the respondents committed some form of homicide, with aggravated murder under Article 114 of the Criminal Code and murder under Article 113 of the Criminal Code being the next most common criminal offenses. It should also be borne in mind that the research was carried out during the period of intensive construction works, which, by early 2027, should fully ensure the alignment of the factual and legal framework.

From a regulatory perspective, we believe that the most room for improvement exists in the area of classification of prisoners, including women prisoners, which determines their categorization and subsequent classification based on assessed risk levels, the type of the criminal offense, the length of sentence, health status, relationship to the criminal offense, form of guilt, prior convictions, and other criteria established by the ministerial regulations governing classification and subsequent classification of convicted persons. However, this act does not define the concept of security risk, nor does it specify how this risk is quantified, other than through the application of a “non-discriminatory” Risk Assessment Questionnaire, which, in our opinion, should be subject to revision (Pavlović et al., 2016; Ilijić et al., 2024; Stevanović et al., 2024), especially in the part that refers to women as convicted persons.

To ensure this, as noted by Auty and Liebling, the effort to manage a secure prison must be accompanied by achieving a combination and integration of dimensions such as harmony, security, and professionalism (Auty & Liebling, 2020, 2024), as well as recognizing the fact that the power dynamics between prison officers and women deprived of their liberty, as well as the responsibility to manage that power and authority appropriately in all situations, understanding the particular vulnerability faced by women prisoners, especially in relation to the application of disciplinary measures, searches, and other restrictions, as well as reactions to sexual and any other abuse in prison, require the establishment of special measures to prevent and combat violence against women prisoners, either by other prisoners, or by prison staff.

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