

Sports and Recreational Activities as a Means of Reintegration of Female Convicts*

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The male-to-female ratio in the prison system is disproportionate. The number of women serving prison sentences is small compared to men. Women make up 10%–15% of the global prison population, while in Serbia the figure stands at 4.2%. This fact is of significant importance because facilities for women are allocated far fewer resources than those for men, resulting in much worse conditions in female correctional facilities. The short-term and long-term benefits of physical activity are numerous, both for mental and physical health. However, there has been little research assessing the levels of physical activity among women sentenced to imprisonment. For instance, in the United Kingdom, 48% of women in female prisons participated in physical activities on average. In Australia, half of female prisoners reported engaging in daily exercise. In a French prison, 60% of women were minimally or highly active, while 57% of women in Canadian prisons engaged in some form of physical activity. According to research conducted in Serbia in 2021, in the Correctional Facility for Women in Požarevac, 51 women played basketball and volleyball, while 14 played chess across all wards (open, semi-open, and closed). By 2023, the situation had significantly improved, with the highest interest recorded in aerobics (87 individuals), volleyball (70 individuals), and table tennis (40 individuals), while interest in chess was the lowest (4 individuals). International legislation stipulates that prisoners, although deprived of their freedom during their sentence, should not lose other rights, including the right to engage in sports and physical activities, the possibility of education, retraining, and other activities offered by the prison itself. Research indicates that sport contributes not only to improved physical health but also to the social integration of those who engage in it.

KEYWORDS: female prisoners / sports and recreational activities / sanctions / resocialisation / reintegration

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Introduction

In the mid-20th century, there emerged a tendency to develop a different model of execution of the sentence of deprivation of liberty, which, compared to the conventional model, is not based on rigid rules regulating prison regimes, but rather on a concept of treatment of prisoners. Additionally, there was a need to define new correctional programmes used in the process of resocialisation (Igrački, 2020, p. 14–15). When we refer to the process of resocialisation, we mean the methods of observing the personality of the convicted individual to identify their socio-psychological, criminological, medical, and other personality traits, based on which an appropriate treatment is defined. The results obtained through personality observation can be used at various stages of resocialisation. Successful execution is entrusted to rehabilitation staff such as educators, psychologists, instructors, sports coordinators, and other participants in the implementation of correctional programmes. Prisoners are involved in certain forms of treatment, as Milutinović (1977, p. 117–118) states: (a) moral-pedagogical education and training of prisoners; (b) vocational and professional training; (c) organising free time (prison leisure); (d) prisoners' participation in their own rehabilitation; (e) rewarding and punishing prisoners; (f) bringing the prisoner's treatment closer to the conditions of life outside prison; and (g) applying psychotherapy and group therapy. The aim of treatment is to address the individual causes of criminality (Stefani et al., 1968, p. 226) in a process directed towards guiding the prisoners through several stages, including adopting the accepted value system in society, which is manifested through engagement in sports activities, reading books and newspapers, listening to the radio, watching television, going to the cinema, attending theatre performances, publishing their own newsletters, and participating in various clubs (e.g., visual arts, music, drama, sports). Various effects can be achieved through these activities: recreational, cultural, educational, pedagogical, and others, which are included in the elements of "social reintegration" of prisoners (Stevanović, 2014, p. 62–63).

Designing activities for prisoners and organising their free time is of great importance for their moral, intellectual, physical, and aesthetic education, as well as for their rehabilitation and the preservation and development of positive values and health. Prison rules and facilities are designed for a male prison population, as women comprise a very small percentage of the total prison population, and their position is therefore much more disadvantaged, posing a real challenge for prison administrations. It is essential that all measures be taken to ensure that women in prison have genuine gender equality in all areas of policy-making, particularly regarding the prevention of abuse in prison. Female prisoners are especially vulnerable due to their social situation and cultural roles.

Over 20 million Americans are currently, or have been, serving a prison sentence, while approximately 9 million Americans cycle in and out of prison each

year (Ahalt et al., 2015). Of the individuals incarcerated in prison, 10%–15% are women (Minton & Zeng, 2015).

Research in England and Wales indicates that seven out of ten women in prison report having been victims of domestic violence.² According to the Ministry of Justice data for England and Wales, self-harm among women in prison increased by 29% in the last quarter (January–March 2024).³ Additionally, the number of female prisoners is projected to rise to 4,200 by November 2027 in England and Wales⁴. The majority of women in prison (82%), according to the data, report having mental health problems, compared to just over half of men (59%).⁵

In Australia, half of the female prisoners reported being sufficiently active, engaging in 150 minutes of exercise per week (Indig et al., 2010). Among female prisoners in Canada, 29% engaged in physical activity for more than 30 minutes daily (Johnson et al., 2019). In the United Kingdom, 11% of female prisoners reported meeting government guidelines for moderate activity of at least 30 minutes, five times a week while in prison (Plugge et al., 2009).

Looking at statistical data in the Republic of Serbia,⁶ in 2015, 3,084 women were convicted, in 2018, 2,968 women, in 2019, 2,862 women, and in 2022, 2,690 women were convicted, and of these, three women were convicted of the most serious crimes, and 147 women were convicted of domestic violence, with 79% being victims of domestic violence. A total of 2.3% of women aged 18–74 in Serbia experienced some form of violence from an intimate partner in 2022.

It is essential to consider several factors regarding female prisoners, due to various forms of physical, sexual, and psychological violence, as well as domestic violence, the need for mental health protection, treatment for alcohol or psychoactive substance abuse, and the risk of re-victimisation after release from prison.⁷ Women often have a history of traumatic experiences and abuse, leading

² Bromley Briefings Prison, Factfile: February 2024, <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/bromley-briefings-prison-factfile-february-2024/>, accessed on 15 September 2024.

³ Safety in Custody Statistics, England and Wales: Deaths in Prison Custody to June 2024 Assaults and Self-harm to March 2024, Published 25 July 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/safety-in-custody-quarterly-update-to-march-2024/safety-in-custody-statistics-england-and-wales-deaths-in-prison-custody-to-june-2024-assaults-and-self-harm-to-march-2024>, accessed on 15 September 2024.

⁴ Prison Population Projections: 2023 to 2028, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-population-projections-2023-to-2028>, accessed on 15 September 2024.

⁵ Bromley Briefings Prison, Factfile: February 2024, <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/bromley-briefings-prison-factfile-february-2024/>, accessed on 15 September 2024.

⁶ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2024/Pdf/G20246004.pdf>

⁷ Ireland: 2014 visit, paragraph 86. See also, e.g., Rules 41, 42 and 44 of the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women. Offenders (“Bangkok Rules”), accessed on 17 September 2024.

them to enter prison as victims of physical, psychological, and sexual violence (Prost et al., 2022).

The most popular activities for prisoners are sports and recreational activities. These prisoners' activities are of great importance for their mental, moral, physical, and aesthetic education, i.e., rehabilitation, in other words, for the preservation and development of positive values, which is the essence and goal of sports recreation, as well as to provide optimal conditions and opportunities for modern individuals, through various sports and recreational activities, to fulfil their bio-psycho-social need for movement and play, engage more meaningfully and creatively in their free time, maintain and improve their health, preserve vitality, life and work optimism, maintain and improve their general physical, functional, and work abilities, foster a sporting and competitive spirit, develop tolerance in behaviour, and reduce aggression, destructiveness, and antisocial behaviour, aiming at better reintegration into society.

According to the Law on the Execution of Criminal Sanctions (hereinafter referred to as LECS)⁸ sentenced individuals are entitled to spend at least two hours outside closed facilities. Accordingly, depending on age and physical condition, convicted persons have the right to participate in organised physical activities during their free time and use the available sports fields and equipment together with other convicted persons, in line with Article 80 of LECS. Depending on the technical capabilities of the facility, the most common sports and recreational activities in correctional facilities include football, volleyball, basketball, table tennis, and chess. Serbian Correctional Facilities, as well as the Juvenile Detention Facilities, have sports fields, equipment, some even have gymnasiums, swimming pools, and outdoor gyms for recreation and competitions for both prisoners and juveniles. Most facilities are also staffed and organisationally trained to carry out these activities. Physical engagement of prisoners is of great importance for their physical and mental health.

The term "sports recreation" in the Law on Sport ("Official Gazette of the RS," no. 10/2016), depending on the context in which it is used, means: a type of activity (sphere of activity), process of exercising, i.e., the transformation of psychosomatic status; the omnipresence of values resulting from science and modern practice; the system of organisations and institutions (organisational structure of sports recreation); and the system of values (results, i.e., effects of the activity).

The need for activating the human body to maintain its functional state is constant. However, in modern conditions, with the sedentary lifestyle of people, the lack of movement (hypokinesia) is becoming increasingly present, unfortunately accompanied by its numerous consequences. Hence, the appeals by

⁸ "Official Gazette", no. 55/2014, 35/2019, accessed on 17 September 2024.

professionals (in health, sport, and economics) for the necessity of systematic (planned and organised) exercise to preserve health, work, reproductive, defensive, and other human abilities, are understandable. The World Health Organisation's recommendations are present and specific. The Law on Sport of the Republic of Serbia is decisive regarding the right to practise sports. Article 4 of the Law on Sport ("Official Gazette of the RS," no. 10/2016) stipulates: "Everyone has the right to practice sports". Individuals sentenced to imprisonment, from the perspective of movement activities, certainly represent a specific group.

Women prisoners have specific needs and demands arising from the nature of their criminal acts, the conditions within prisons, and their broader socio-economic position. Women sentenced to prison are often marginalized, impoverished, under-educated, and single mothers, facing discrimination based on race, class, and gender. Some of the adopted legal regulations include the protection of human rights and prisoners' rights, the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners, the Bangkok Rules, European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, aimed at protection of basic rights and freedoms of prisoners, especially female prisoners, their rehabilitation and successful reintegration, which are crucial for ensuring the quality of prison life, even after serving their sentence.

In this context, Serbia has developed a Strategy⁹ that regulates in more detail execution of criminal sanctions with the aim of protecting society from crime, improving the conditions in which criminal sanctions are carried out, and specify in more detail the implementation of modern innovations in treatment of convicted persons for the purpose of their successful reintegration and reduction of recidivism.

The mission of the Strategy¹⁰ is reflected in the further development of the system of execution of criminal sanctions, with the priority of protecting society from crime, continuous improvement of the conditions under which criminal sanctions are executed, and application of modern achievements in the treatment of prisoners to ensure successful reintegration into society and reduce recidivism, by improving female prisoners through gender-sensitive improvement of existing treatment programs; continuous work on knowledge and skill development as part of preparation for release and efficient integration; enhancing cooperation with

⁹ The Development Strategy for the System of Enforcement of Criminal Sanctions – for the period 2021–2027

<https://www.mpravde.gov.rs/tekst/33173/strategija-razvoja-sistema-izvršenja-krivicnih-sankcija-u-republici-srbiji-za-period-2021-2027-godina.php>, accessed on 17 September 2024.

¹⁰The Development Strategy for the System of Enforcement of Criminal Sanctions – for the period 2021–2027,

<https://www.mpravde.gov.rs/tekst/33173/strategija-razvoja-sistema-izvršenja-krivicnih-sankcija-u-republici-srbiji-za-period-2021-2027-godina.php>, accessed on 17 September 2024.

government bodies, local self-government and territorial autonomy bodies, civil society organizations, and other relevant entities to improve the effectiveness of treatment of female prisoners and ease their reintegration into society after release.

Sports and Recreational Activities and Reintegration of Female Prisoners

Education and work are an integral part of the modern prison System, but also insufficient, because the time in prison must be meaningfully and usefully spent both in prison and after serving the prison sentence. Practice shows that the effects of the sentence of deprivation of liberty are very modest, primarily due to the rising recidivism rates over recent decades. Overcrowding in prisons leads to disorganization and an overall crisis of the prison system. The structure of committed crimes is moving towards committing a greater number of the most serious crimes with elements of violence, crimes of terrorism, and the profile of prisoners is becoming more complex both criminologically and psychologically and there is also an increasing number of prisoners dependent on psychoactive substances, financial situation of prisons and employees is very poor, staff capacity is inadequate, there is a lack of motivation among prison staff, etc. (Igrački & Ilić, 2022).

Although the provisions on the manner, methodology and objectives of dealing with prisoners are clear, there is variability in practice. Meaningful prison work, education, sports and recreational activities and active free time sometimes deviate from the fundamental principles of legal acts, both national and international, which aim to equip, self-develop, and resocialize prisoners (Igrački & Brašovan Delić, 2023). Since we cannot choose prisoners, the staff is chosen – Rule 46.1¹¹ that refers to the staff of correctional facilities prescribes that “Prison administration shall provide for the careful selection of every grade of the personnel, since it is on their integrity, humanity, professional capacity and personal suitability for the work that the proper administration of the institutions depends”. Recommendations of the European Union and other international treaties (REC Recommendation),¹² establish that the prison sentence should aim at easier reintegration of offenders into society.

¹¹ Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, Adopted by the First UN Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders held at Geneva in 1955, and approved by Economic and Social Council by its resolutions 663 (XXIV) in 1957 and 2076 (LXII) in 1977. Translation taken from the *Archives for Legal and Social Sciences*, no. 4/1956, (transl. prof. N. Srzentić), accessed on 17 September 2024.

¹² Committee on the Treatment of Prisoners, [https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/3983922/6970334/CMRec+\(2006\)+2+on+the+European+Prison+Rules.pdf/e0c900b9-92cd-4dbc-b23e-d662a94f3a96](https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/3983922/6970334/CMRec+(2006)+2+on+the+European+Prison+Rules.pdf/e0c900b9-92cd-4dbc-b23e-d662a94f3a96), accessed on 17 September 2024.

Prisoners have a limited choice of sports and recreational activities (Igrački, 2021), and therefore do not see the ultimate purpose of these activities. Apart from work and education, prisoners mostly define their free time themselves, as in most facilities there is often no specialist in charge of this type of recreation. Interviews with prisoners and professional staff reveal that the position of “Sports Officer” is not filled with the staff with appropriate qualifications, and instead, educators or commanders often take on these responsibilities (Igrački, 2021a). Sports and recreational activities, together with other forms of occupation, are seen as primary source of social adaptation to the prison environment, enabling the reduction of tension and adaptation to the existing situation. According to the data from various studies, sports and recreational activities are one of the most important tools for maintaining emotional balance and mental health in prison, as well as for coping with stress and tension. The most common sports activities in prisons are football, volleyball, basketball, table tennis, handball, and chess. Physical activity has a positive impact on prisoners’ physical and mental health, fosters a competitive spirit, increases tolerance in behaviour, improves interpersonal relationships, and, above all, channels physical strength and aggression toward achieving sporting results, while reducing destructiveness and antisocial behavior.

Fun forms of recreation also help prisoners escape negativity, making it easier for them to cope with daily prison life, routine, limited schedule, discipline, and control, and foster positive thinking (Carvalho et al., 2015). One of the most common coping strategies available to all prisoners is positive thinking about future plans and planning for a better life after serving a prison sentence. Sports and recreational activities can be seen as part of the implementation of future visions for using free time in correctional facilities, promoting skill development, self-improvement, and the discovery of new hobbies. Female prisoners emphasize that participating in sports and recreational activities is beneficial and positive, and that free time spent in such a manner significantly contributes to future plans, changes in lifestyle, improving the atmosphere in the prison, and reducing tension (Gallant et al., p. 95–123).

Research data (Igrački, 2021b) indicate that 31 percent of female prisoners in the semi-open and open wards of the Correctional Facility for Women in Požarevac, and 69 percent in the closed ward, stated that there are no sports and recreational activities available to them.

These female prisoners pointed out that they do not even have basic conditions for walking. They expressed interest in activities like yoga, volleyball, swimming, dance, and aerobics, but lack the necessary conditions. After research conducted in 2023 (Ćopić, 2024), the situation in the Correctional Facility for Women in Požarevac has changed significantly. Educational workshops and clubs are held, which include music (choir and folklore), drama and recitation, literary club, visual arts club, sports (volleyball, table tennis, aerobics, chess), sewing and

tailoring courses, cosmetics courses (manicure, pedicure, hairdressing), photography courses, and fruit and vegetable cultivation. Out of a total of 20 women prisoners involved in specialized programs, 10 take part in the choir, 12 in the visual arts club, 23 in the folklore group, while 20 take part in drama and recitation programs, and 15 take part in literary activities. The greatest interest is expressed in aerobics (87 participants), volleyball (70 participants), and table tennis (40 participants), while the least interest is in chess (4 participants).

A total of 50 female prisoners are included in the educational workshops. The fruit and vegetable cultivation course is attended by 10 prisoners, and manicure and pedicure courses are attended by 12 prisoners. The key takeaway is that sports in prison can and does offer numerous possibilities, but there are complexities related to developing, implementing, and evaluating sports programs within the prison environment and these activities can be most beneficial if they are characterised as a means of implementing social, psychological, and physical changes, rather than just a solution (Popadić et al., 2011).

Conclusion

The success of the process of resocialization of convicted persons is highly dependent on their willingness to correct their criminal behavior patterns and adopt positive social values and norms of behavior in line with applicable legal regulations. The specific circumstances and conditions in correctional facilities emphasize the importance of daily physical movement-exercise for convicted persons. There is a proven link i.e. positive effect between planned and systematic physical exercise and an individual's psycho-physical state. Therefore, it is necessary and logical that contemporary trends in treatment of prisoners use, i.e., apply knowledge about the impact of sports and recreational activities on health, but also on resocialisation of convicted persons. This is especially the case when considering that prisoners consider sports activities to be important, and very rarely misuse the opportunities provided to them. Prisoners emphasize that engaging in sports and recreational activities is beneficial and positive for them, and that spending their free time in such a manner while serving their sentences significantly contributes to their future plans, lifestyle changes, improving the atmosphere in prison, and reducing tension.

The research shows that the level of interest and involvement of female prisoners in sports and recreational activities is that out of 200 female prisoners, 30 percent actively engage in sports and recreational activities, 52 percent participate occasionally, and 18 percent do not participate at all. The results clearly indicate that motivation for active engagement in organized free time is not well-developed among female prisoners. Given that free time is the time when prisoners have the right to spend two hours outdoors in fresh air and that they have

the right to organized physical activity, including the right to use sports fields and equipment together with other prisoners, this time is still underused and not always used in a purposeful way.

By consistently applying existing regulations, with consideration of international rules, conventions, and declarations, i.e., standards recommended by them, and with the improvement of spatial and technical conditions, as well as adequate staffing with professionals, better treatment effects on prisoners during their sentence can be achieved. The effects should be evaluated in two periods, through those that are manifested already during the serving of the prison sentence, and in the future, after release. The fact that deprivation of liberty and harsh conditions in correctional facilities are neither the only nor the effective ways to reduce crime and recidivism of convicts has long been known.

At this moment, Serbia does not have a post-penal protection system. This means that, after being released from prison, women who have served their sentences are left to fend for themselves and have no one to turn to, which places them in a very difficult position as they face numerous problems during their reintegration into society. Therefore, it would be of great importance for women, but not only them, to have a service available to provide support and ease their return to the community after their release. This institution existed in the past, but it was abolished in the 1990s, leading to a lack of systemic support and protection of women's rights, and as a result, the cycle of violence often does not end after their release from prison, with the rate of recidivism remaining quite high.

A convict needs help in finding a way to leave prison with as few harmful consequences as possible and to integrate into life more easily after their sentence has ended. The legal basis for this attitude can be found in the Law on the Execution of Criminal Sanctions (2019) and in the by-laws that prescribe the treatment. The question is whether the staff in penal institutions are equipped to meet the challenges of contemporary penological treatment and whether they possess the necessary knowledge and skills in penology, andragogy, psychology, medicine, criminology, and other areas to meet the standards of the modern world where the fundamental rights of convicts are respected. As for the facilities, equipment, devices, sports fields, and gear, the indicators are very poor. These are clear indicators, although the majority of penologists, criminologists, psychologists, medical staff, and other relevant professionals dealing with this issue agree that the use of prisoners' free time and sports and recreational activities must be approached more seriously, and with new ideas and content, aligned with modern times, structure, and the interests of the convicts and that the current effects of free activities do not contribute to the successful process of the resocialisation of both female and male prisoners and their reintegration into society.

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