

Quality of Prison Life of Female Prisoners in Serbia: Key Challenges and Areas of Strength¹

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Despite a range of differences between male and female prisoners, research on the female prison population has been lacking due to their smaller representation worldwide. To address this gap, the study aimed to understand the overall prison experience of female prisoners in Serbia by analysing the quality of prison life and examining various dimensions across five overarching categories of the prison climate. A descriptive and cross-sectional study was conducted using the convenience sample of 91 female prisoners serving prison sentences in the Correctional Institution for Women in Požarevac. The Measuring the Quality of Prison Life (MQPL) survey and a one-way repeated-measures ANOVA with post-hoc Bonferroni adjustments were used. Significant variations in ratings of the prison climate were identified. The overall prison experience was rated relatively low with only one quarter of the sample giving a positive rating. The highest-ranked MQPL dimensions were Prisoner Adaptation and Distress, while the lowest were Well-being, Bureaucratic Legitimacy, Organisation and Consistency, and Decency. The proposed holistic approach with practical interventions offers the potential to enhance prison life quality and support the well-being of female prisoners, who represent a vulnerable and marginalised group in society.

Keywords: quality of prison life, female prisoners, Serbia, prison system, prison climate

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1 Introduction

For a long time, the study of the female prison population, their treatment and the conditions in women's prisons was

overlooked due to the smaller representation of women in the overall prison population. However, there is now an increasing focus on the experiences of women within the predominantly male prison environment. Globally, women made up 6.9% of the prison population in 2022, with their number increased by nearly 60% since 2000 (Fair & Walmsley, 2022). In Europe, the percentage of female prisoners remains relatively stable, accounting for approximately 5% of the overall prison population in 2021, with variations among countries ranging from 1.3% in Albania to 8.5% in Latvia (Aebi et al., 2022). In the US, where the incarceration rates for men decreased slightly, the imprisonment rates of women and their jail incarceration increased significantly over the past four decades, leading to a historic high in the number of women in prisons and jails (Heimer et al., 2023).

The rise in female criminality is often attributed to minor property crimes, indicative of economic vulnerability, or drug-related offences, reflecting public health challenges, including addiction, that women are facing (Acale Sánchez, 2019; Mallicoat & Ireland, 2014). However, it is important to understand that the intersectionality of factors such as gender, economic status, class, race and ethnicity, coupled with the connection between the victimisation and criminalisation of

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women (Comack, 1996; Nikolić-Ristanović, 2000; Nuytiens & Christiaens, 2012; Petkovska, 2023), makes female prisoners one of the most vulnerable social groups (Pavićević, 2020). Female prisoners have specific needs and requirements arising from the nature of their criminal offences, the conditions within prison, and the broader social, socioeconomic and gender context (overall position of women in society). The majority of female prisoners are marginalised, impoverished, undereducated and single mothers, facing discrimination based on race, class and gender (Bloom, 1996; Covington, 1998; Savić & Knežić, 2019).

2 Vulnerabilities and challenges: Gender-specific considerations in prison systems

Human rights and the protection of prisoners' rights are fundamental to ensuring the quality of prison life. However, criminal-penal discourses concerning female criminality usually reflect paternalism, gender inequality and sexism (Faith, 2011). The United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules) provide guidelines for protecting the rights of women in prison (United Nations, 2010; van Hout & Wessels, 2021). The preamble of the Bangkok Rules recognises that many prison facilities worldwide were originally designed for male prisoners, resulting in a lack of consideration for the unique needs and requirements of female prisoners (United Nations, 2010). These rules acknowledge the significance of implementing gender-specific classification systems, addressing specific needs, developing treatment programmes and providing post-incarceration reintegration support to better meet the requirements of female prisoners (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2014). In other words, correctional programmes and facilities were initially designed to meet the needs of male prisoners and typically applied to women without the necessary modifications and adjustments. Previously, the Corston Report (Corston, 2007) drew attention to the neglect of women-specific service needs in female prisons. Despite female prisoners exhibiting greater treatment needs in terms of the prevalence and severity of conditions compared to males, the prison system is constrained by limited resources and capabilities to address these concerns. Furthermore, female prisoners often face inadequate health-care resources despite having high rates of chronic disorders and vulnerability to health risks (Fazel & Baillargeon, 2011; Mallicoat & Ireland, 2014).

Women in the criminal justice system often have a history of traumatic experiences and abuse, leading them to enter prison as victims of physical, psychological and sexual violence (Prost et al., 2022). Evidence to date also suggests that

female prisoners have higher levels of imported vulnerability and distress upon entry into the prison system than male prisoners (Liebling & Ludlow, 2016; Liebling et al., 2005). Research by Tripodi and Pettus-Davis (2013) highlights that women prisoners often have greater experiences of prior victimisation and higher rates of mental illness in comparison to their male counterparts. In most cases, these women have resorted to violent criminal acts against their abusers (Comack, 2018; Nuytiens & Christiaens, 2012; Saxena et al., 2014; Terry & Williams, 2021). Earlier studies highlighted the distinct pathways to offending for women compared to men. The criminological "pathways perspective" emphasises a comprehensive examination of life experiences in the study of crime causation (Belknap, 2021; Bloom et al., 2003; Nuytiens & Christiaens, 2012). Despite being imprisoned for similar crimes, the circumstances under which these offences were committed differ significantly between male and female perpetrators (Cruz et al., 2023; Vujadinović et al., 2023). It is also important to recognise that the prison experience is not an isolated event, but that it can amplify existing trauma in women, and conversely, the trauma itself may further compound the challenges of the prison experience for women (de Claire & Dixon, 2017; Moloney et al., 2009; Prost et al., 2022).

Moreover, imprisonment can profoundly affect mental health, particularly for women with children and a history of victimisation (Fraser et al., 2009). The prison experience is widely acknowledged to be more challenging for women than men, primarily due to the intensified disruption of family and interpersonal connections, particularly with their children (Ward & Kassebaum, 1965, as cited in Jiang & Winfree, 2006: 37). For female prisoners, one of the most challenging aspects is the deprivation of motherhood since the physical and psychological separation hinders their ability to care for their children properly. Regulated visits and correspondence in prison do not alleviate their desire to be with their children but rather serve as a constant reminder of their powerlessness in influencing their lives (Špadijer-Džinić et al., 2009).

3 Assessing prison social climate: Female prisoners in Serbia

The prison social climate is a complex construct widely recognised as crucial for rehabilitation and resocialisation and the overall well-being of prisoners. It includes staff-prisoner relationships, prisoner interactions, organisation of activities and feelings of safety (Auty & Liebling, 2020; Harding, 2014; Ilijić et al., 2022). Previous research confirmed the association between a positive social climate and greater prisoner well-being, reduced adverse psychological experiences, better adaptation to prison conditions, decreased violence in prison

and recidivism rate, and positive treatment outcomes (Auty & Liebling, 2020; Bosma et al., 2020; Harding, 2014; Schubert et al., 2012; Skar et al., 2019; van Ginneken & Palmen, 2023; van Ginneken et al., 2019). The Measuring the Quality of Prison Life (MQPL) model offers a comprehensive conceptualisation of the prison social climate (Liebling et al., 2012). The model evaluates the quality of prison life and its relevant outcomes in penal and forensic settings and also provides valuable insights into the prison environment and its impact on prisoners' well-being and adaptation. It has 21 dimensions thematically grouped into five global dimensions: staff-prisoner relationships, professionalism, security, conditions and family contact, and well-being and development.

Understanding the unique challenges and needs faced by female prisoners and highlighting the areas of strength within the prison environment could influence policies, initiatives and interventions aimed at improving their well-being and adjustment during incarceration. Yet no research attention has been given to the prison social climate in Serbia. In Serbia, the Correctional Institution for Women in Požarevac is the only dedicated facility for female prisoners, housing adult women and older female minors serving sentences for criminal offences and misdemeanours. Previous research highlighted the alarming living conditions for female prisoners, emphasising the need for wider implementation of alternative sanctions, increased budget allocation, and better prison conditions to safeguard basic inmate rights and ease staff work. Funding shortages and overcrowding were noted as the main challenges. The main accommodation building, constructed in 1874, had never undergone significant investments or renovations until the current decade. There was also a need to enhance healthcare services for female inmates and provide them with increased job opportunities, access to elementary and informal education, vocational training, broader exercise programmes and various forms of support such as self-help groups and assistance from fellow inmates (Čopić & Šaćiri, 2012; Čopić et al., 2012). The limited research on female prisoners in Serbian prisons suggests similarities with patterns observed in other countries, with many being convicted as a reaction to the prolonged victimisation they experienced (Bjeloš, 2011; Savić & Knežić, 2019). Prior research has been focused on women's prison deprivations, living conditions, treatment and fulfilment of their rights in prison, support and interpersonal relations among female prisoners as a vital aspect for better adaptation to prison life and its quality, and transgender women incarcerated in men's penitentiaries (Čopić et al., 2012; Mršević, 2016; Savić & Knežić, 2019; Špadijer-Džinić et al., 2009). The present study examines the quality of prison life as reported by female prisoners in Serbia and aims to: 1) evaluate the overall prison experience of female prisoners based on their ratings; 2) analyse differences

in the quality of prison life among female prisoners across the five overarching categories and 21 dimensions of MQPL; and 3) identify specific prison climate dimensions requiring improvement or intervention in the Serbian prison system.

4 Methods

4.1 Procedure

This descriptive and exploratory study is part of a larger national three-year research project entitled PrisonLIFE, which aims to improve our understanding of the quality of prison life of prisoners in Serbia. All procedures were conducted following ethical approval granted by the Ethics Committee of the Institute for Criminological and Sociological Research (No. 103/2020, 38c/2022, 274/22) and in line with the principles outlined in the 1964 Helsinki Declaration (World Medical Association, 1964) and its subsequent revisions. The author of the original instrument, Professor Alison Liebling, provided formal authorisation for the cross-cultural adaptation of the MQPL into Serbian.

Data was collected from the Correctional Institution for Women in Požarevac, the only prison for female prisoners in Serbia, and the convenience sampling method was used. An invitation to partake in the research, along with detailed information about the project and the study's objectives, was displayed on the prison's notice board for two weeks. The general inclusion criteria were as follows: prisoners who were literate and understood the official Serbian language, had served more than 30 days of their prison sentences and voluntarily agreed to participate in the research. Individuals who expressed their interest in participating could apply through the treatment service staff members. Data was collected in a single session in the prison's common dining room using the paper and pencil method, with researchers available to assist participants with any comprehension issues related to the survey items. Prisoners who participated in the study put the completed questionnaire in an envelope and handed it to the researchers.

All prisoners provided written informed consent before participating in the study. They were informed about the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time, and the voluntary and anonymous nature of their participation. They were assured that the collected information would be used solely for the research project and that no personally identifiable information would be disclosed.

The data obtained from the Directorate for Execution of Criminal Sanctions at the Ministry of Justice revealed that, during the period of data collection, there were a total of

230 female prisoners within the population. With a response rate of 42.2%, 97 questionnaires with signed informed consent were collected. However, after the database was created, six questionnaires were excluded from further analysis due to more than 10% missing or not valid responses (Bennett, 2001), giving the final response rate of 39.6% and a sample of 91 participants. A subgroup of participants ($n = 65$) underwent a second administration of the MQPL survey after an eight-week interval, allowing for the calculation of test-retest correlations.

4.2 Measures

The Serbian language version of the MQPL questionnaire was used to assess female prisoners' perceptions of their quality of life (Liebling et al., 2012; Miličević et al., 2023). The MQPL survey consists of five main thematic categories that encompass 21 dimensions, reflecting both the treatment and physical conditions rated by the prisoners on a five-point scale (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree). The MQPL survey also includes one global question assessing the prisoners' overall rating of quality of prison life (1 = lowest, 10 = highest). Detailed information about the conceptual basis and development of the MQPL survey are described in previous studies (Liebling & Arnold, 2004; Liebling et al., 2012).

The Harmony dimensions evaluate aspects such as Entry into Custody (5 items, e.g. When I first came into this prison, I felt looked after), Respect/Courtesy (8 items, e.g. This prison is poor at treating prisoners with respect), Staff-Prisoner Relationships (7 items, e.g. I trust the officers in this prison), Humanity (8 items, e.g. I am not being treated as a human being in here), Decency (5 items, e.g. Prisoners spend too long locked up in their cells in this prison), Care for the Vulnerable (5 items, e.g. This prison is good at providing care to those who are at risk of suicide), and Help and Assistance (6 items, e.g. Wing staff take an interest in helping to sort out my healthcare needs). These aspects encompass feelings and interactions within the prison environment, including the prisoners' initial experiences, respectful treatment by staff, trust and fairness in staff-prisoner interactions, a compassionate and humane atmosphere, the perceived reasonableness of rules, care for at-risk prisoners, and support for issues such as drug problems, healthcare and personal progress.

The Professionalism dimensions cover Staff Professionalism (9 items, e.g. Staff carry out their security tasks well in this prison), Bureaucratic Legitimacy (7 items, e.g. I feel stuck in this system), Fairness (6 items, e.g. The regime in this prison is fair), and Organisation and Consistency (6 items, e.g. This prison is well organised). These aspects relate to the competence and confidence of prison staff, the transparency

and responsiveness of the prison system, its moral recognition of individuals, the perceived fairness and legality of punishments and procedures, and the clarity, predictability and reliability of the prison environment.

The Security dimensions are assessed through scales for Policing and Security (9 items, e.g. Supervision of prisoners is poor in this prison), Prisoner Safety (5 items, e.g. Generally I fear for my physical safety), Prisoner Adaptation (3 items, e.g. In this prison, you have to be in a group in order to get by), and Drugs and Exploitation (5 items, e.g. Drugs cause a lot of problems between prisoners in here). These aspects encompass the supervision and control exerted by staff over the prison environment, the sense of security and protection from harm or danger, the influence or pressure to engage in trade and alliances, and the prevalence of drugs, bullying and victimisation within the prison setting.

Next, Conditions (4 items, e.g. The quality of my living conditions is poor in this prison) and Family Contact (3 items, e.g. The length of time for each visit is long enough) provide an insight into the Conditions and Family Contact dimensions. These factors relate to the assessment of living conditions as satisfactory or decent and the availability of opportunities for maintaining family relationships.

Lastly, Personal Development (8 items, e.g. I am encouraged to work towards goals/targets in this prison), Personal Autonomy (4 items, e.g. You can keep your personality in this prison), Well-being (4 items, e.g. My time in this prison feels very much like a punishment) and Distress (3 items, e.g. I have problems sleeping at night) cover the Well-being and Development dimensions. These factors encompass the environment's role in assisting prisoners with their offending behaviour, preparing them for release and personal development, as well as prisoners' sense of agency, experiences of pain, punishment, tension and severe emotional disturbance.

In the scoring process, negative statements are transformed into positive ones to ensure that a higher level of agreement represents a more positive response. Mean scores are calculated for each dimension, with higher scores representing a better quality of prison life. However, it should be noted that higher scores indicate lower levels of distress in the Distress dimension. Following the authors' guidance, scores above 3.00 are considered positive/good, while scores below that threshold indicate areas needing improvement (Liebling et al., 2021).

The original English version of the MQPL demonstrated good psychometric properties, with reliability scores ranging from 0.56 to 0.89 (Barquín et al., 2019; Johnsen et al.,

2011; Liebling et al., 2012). The version used in this study underwent a process of back-translation and adaptation to the Serbian language and the specific conditions within the Serbian prison system (Milićević et al., 2023). The psychometric properties of the MQPL in Serbian were assessed using data from 650 prisoners in five prisons (Mededović et al., 2023). The findings also revealed acceptable to good reliability, with Cronbach's α ranging from 0.60 to 0.97. Furthermore, confirmatory factor analysis indicated a satisfactory model fit, although some MQPL dimensions were highly correlated. Additionally, the dimensions of the Serbian MQPL version demonstrated validity by correlating positively with the WHOQOL-BREF quality of life assessment (Whoqol Group, 1998) and highlighting differences among the five largest prisons in Serbia (Mededović et al., 2023).

To create a comprehensive profile of the female prison population, data regarding age, number of children and duration of imprisonment (time served) were collected from participants. Additionally, information obtained from corrections files was incorporated. Specifically, data on education, marital status, prison ward, type of criminal offence and the presence of violence, sentence length and the risk factor level according to the latest available scoring were selected for this study. It is important to note that the Serbian prison system utilises a standardised version of the Offender Assessment System (OASys) as a risk assessment questionnaire for all prisoners by prison treatment staff to assess the risks, capacities and needs of criminal offenders within the prison environment and to formulate sentence plans for the forthcoming period at regular intervals. The data was collected in May 2022.

4.3 Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated to describe the characteristics of study participants and all MQPL scores. Normality tests using Kolmogorov-Smirnov z statistics were applied to examine the deviations from a normal distribution. Asymmetry and kurtosis values falling within the range of -2 to +2 were considered acceptable indicators of a normal univariate distribution (George & Mallery, 2010). Data were also screened for normality by visual inspection (histogram and Q-Q plot). Two statistical measures were employed to assess reliability: Cronbach's α coefficients for internal consistency and test-retest correlations. According to Nunnally (1978, as cited in Schweizer, 2011), a measure is considered to have an acceptable degree of internal consistency when its reliability coefficient is at least 0.70, while a good degree of consistency is achieved when the coefficient is at least 0.80. The presence of floor or ceiling effects is considered when more than 15% of respondents achieve the lowest or highest possible score, respectively (Terwee et al., 2007).

Due to missing data in seven out of 37 variables (18.9%), we used a pairwise deletion strategy for statistical analyses. The missing values, ranging from 1.1% (e.g., education level, number of children) to 5.5% of cases (overall rating of the quality of prison life), can be attributed to organisational issues in the corrections files, the unavailability of the required information and the length of the questionnaire (Table 1). These incomplete data were recorded in only four cases (4.4%), while 87 (95.6%) cases had complete data.

To compare participants' scores on different dimensions and categories of the MQPL survey, we used ANOVA one-way repeated-measures, followed by post-hoc comparisons with a Bonferroni adjustment to account for multiple comparisons. In the case of the Conditions and Family Contact dimension, we used paired-sample t -tests to compare two scores. Partial Eta squared (η_p^2) was used to examine effect sizes and interpreted according to the Cohen (1988) classification, where $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$ – 0.05 was considered small, $\eta_p^2 = 0.06$ – 0.13 moderate, and $\eta_p^2 \geq 0.14$ large effect size.

5 Results

5.1 Sample

The sample consisted of 91 female prisoners serving prison sentences in the Correctional Institution for Women in Požarevac, with an average age of 39.77 years ($SD = 10.71$; range 21–74). The participants in the study were primarily individuals who had completed high school (47.8%) and were either married or had a partner (48.3%), with many having two (27.8%) or no children (31.1%). The sample mostly included prisoners from semi-open (22.0%) and closed (75.8%) prison wards, serving their first prison sentence (82.0%), with an average sentence length of 6.32 years ($SD = 7.38$), ranging between two months and 40 years. A significant portion of participants (44.0%) had been in prison for over two years at the time of the study. The most frequent criminal offences for which they were sentenced were primarily related to human health, particularly drug-related offences, which accounted for 33.3% of cases. The majority of participants, specifically 58.9%, had convictions that included elements of violence. Additionally, 51.1% were classified as high-risk offenders, while 43.3% fell into the middle-risk category. Table 1 summarises their demographic, criminological and penological characteristics.

Table 1: Sample demographic, criminological and penological characteristics (*n* = 91)

Variable	<i>n</i>	%	
Age	21–30 years	17	18.7
	31–40 years	32	35.2
	41–50 years	29	31.9
	51 years or older	13	14.3
Education ^a	Unfinished elementary school	8	8.8
	Elementary school	24	26.4
	High school	43	47.3
	Vocational college or higher	15	16.5
Marital status ^b	Single	21	23.1
	Married	17	18.7
	Extramarital union	26	28.6
	Divorced	18	19.8
	Widowed	7	7.7
Number of children ^a	None	28	30.8
	One	21	23.1
	Two	25	27.5
	Three or more	16	17.6
Length of sentence	1 year or less	8	8.8
	Over 1 to 3 years	32	35.2
	Over 3 to 10 years	36	39.6
	More than 10 years	15	16.5
Prison regime	Open	2	2.2
	Semi-open	20	22.0
	Closed	69	75.8
Criminal offences ^a	Against human health	30	33.0
	Against property	22	24.2
	Against life and limb	23	25.3
	Against humanity ^c	5	5.5
Elements of violence ^a	Other criminal offences	10	11.0
	Violent crime	37	40.7
Risk category ^a	Non-violent crime	53	58.2
	Low-risk	3	3.3
	Middle-risk	39	42.9
	High-risk	46	50.5
Time served ^d	Very high-risk	2	2.2
	6 months or less	16	17.6
	Over 6 months to 1 year	15	16.5
	Over 1 year to 2 years	20	22.0
	Over 2 years	40	44.0

First time prisoners ^b	Yes	73	80.2
	No	16	17.6

Other criminal offences, *n* (%) include offences: relating to marriage and family = 4 (4.4%); against economic interests = 3 (3.3%); against road traffic safety = 2 (2.2%); against public peace and order = 1 (1.1%).

^a Missing data, *n* (%) = 1 (1.1).

^b Missing data, *n* (%) = 2 (2.2).

^c Full term: Criminal offences against humanity and other rights guaranteed by international law.

^d At the time of data collection.

5.2 Descriptive statistics, scale reliabilities, and normality tests results for MQPL Scale

As presented in Table 2, high reliability was observed in the five main MQPL categories in this study, with Cronbach's α ranging from 0.83 (Conditions and Family Contact) to 0.97 (Harmony), which is comparable to values reported previously (Liebling et al., 2012; Međedović et al., 2023). Test-retest correlation coefficients are also adequate, ranging from 0.73 (Security) to 0.90 (Professionalism). Although three out of the 21 MQPL dimensions, specifically Entry into Custody, Personal Autonomy and Distress, have lower α coefficients, their test-retest correlations suggest acceptable reliability.

It is worth noting that the main MQPL categories are normally distributed within the sample, and no significant floor or ceiling effects were identified in any of them. Statistically significant Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z statistics were found in seven of the 21 MQPL dimensions, suggesting deviations from the normal distribution. However, the skewness and kurtosis of each distribution were acceptable (less than 2). Regarding floor or ceiling effects in MQPL dimensions, Well-being is the only score with more than 15% of respondents achieving the lowest possible score (16.5%), while Family contact is the only score that reached the highest possible score (15.4%).

Table 2: Descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and normality tests of the MQPL scores

MQPL scores	α	r^a	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Med.</i>	<i>Mode</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	% scoring Min	% scoring Max	Skewness	Kurtosis	K-S
Entry into custody	0.56	0.72	2.72	0.75	2.60	2.60	1.00	4.20	1.1	4.4	-0.03	-0.37	0.09
Respect/courtesy	0.88	0.80	3.21	0.88	3.25	3.25	1.25	5.00	1.1	2.2	-0.14	-0.33	0.06
Staff-prisoner relationships	0.92	0.84	3.13	1.07	3.00	2.29	1.00	5.00	2.2	3.3	-0.17	-0.93	0.11*
Humanity	0.89	0.83	3.16	0.93	3.25	3.63	1.00	4.88	3.3	2.2	-0.32	-0.37	0.09
Decency	0.76	0.72	2.63	0.89	2.67	3.00	1.00	5.00	5.5	1.1	0.12	-0.20	0.13**
Care for the vulnerable	0.80	0.75	2.90	0.96	3.00	2.80	1.00	5.00	4.4	2.2	-0.03	-0.27	0.10*
Help and assistance	0.78	0.78	3.01	0.90	3.00	2.83	1.00	5.00	1.1	3.3	0.14	-0.20	0.08
Harmony	0.97	0.86	3.00	0.82	2.98	2.43	1.20	4.75	2.2	1.1	-0.24	-0.39	0.06
Staff professionalism	0.92	0.91	3.11	1.01	3.00	2.89	1.00	5.00	2.2	3.3	-0.18	-0.70	0.07
Bureaucratic legitimacy	0.80	0.81	2.52	0.83	2.43	2.29	1.00	4.57	3.3	2.2	0.38	-0.25	0.08
Fairness	0.85	0.80	2.69	0.99	2.67	3.33	1.00	5.00	6.6	1.1	0.25	-0.47	0.06
Organisation and consistency	0.83	0.78	2.61	0.92	2.50	1.83	1.00	5.00	1.1	1.1	0.43	-0.36	0.09
Professionalism	0.95	0.90	2.76	0.86	2.75	2.29	1.00	4.86	1.1	1.1	0.11	-0.38	0.07
Policing and security	0.73	0.60	2.93	0.68	2.89	2.56	1.67	5.00	3.3	1.1	0.22	-0.09	0.07
Prisoner safety	0.70	0.62	3.08	0.86	3.00	3.40	1.00	5.00	1.1	1.1	0.02	-0.46	0.08
Prisoner adaptation	0.63	0.62	3.74	0.92	3.67	3.67	1.00	5.00	1.1	14.3	-0.55	-0.21	0.14**
Drugs and exploitation	0.83	0.71	2.70	0.99	2.60	1.40	1.00	5.00	2.2	1.1	0.28	-0.75	0.08
Security	0.88	0.73	3.02	0.66	2.95	2.86	1.59	4.82	1.1	1.1	0.36	-0.12	0.08
Conditions	0.80	0.81	3.04	1.08	3.25	3.25	1.00	5.00	5.5	5.5	-0.21	-0.77	0.12**
Family contact	0.87	0.67	3.29	1.22	3.33	5.00	1.00	5.00	6.6	15.4	-0.18	-1.05	0.14**
Conditions and family contact	0.83	0.82	3.15	0.97	3.29	2.43	1.00	5.00	2.2	3.3	-0.12	-0.55	0.08
Personal development	0.89	0.85	2.95	0.97	2.88	2.75	1.00	5.00	2.2	2.2	0.07	-0.43	0.06
Personal autonomy	0.73	0.72	2.86	0.94	3.00	2.75	1.00	5.00	3.3	3.3	0.06	-0.37	0.08
Wellbeing	0.74	0.68	2.16	0.91	2.00	1.00	1.00	4.50	16.5	1.1	0.62	-0.34	0.14**
Distress	0.63	0.73	3.50	1.03	3.67	3.00	1.00	5.00	1.1	11.0	-0.37	-0.58	0.11*
Wellbeing and development	0.92	0.84	2.85	0.80	2.84	2.00	1.16	4.74	1.1	2.2	0.08	-0.21	0.05

MQPL = Measuring the Quality of Prison Life; K-S = Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistic.

^a All test-retest correlation coefficients are statistically significant at the < 0.01 level.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

5.3 Overall prison experience

Out of a total of 91 prisoners, a large proportion (31.4%) gave the lowest possible score of 1 when rating experience of life in prison (Graph 1). The mean score was 3.53 ($SD = 2.54$; range 1–10). Only 25.6% of the prisoners rated the overall quality of prison life positively (score higher than 5 on a 10-point scale).

relationships ($M = 3.29, SD = 1.22$). In terms of Respect, the mean score was 3.21 ($SD = 0.88$), indicating that prisoners perceived a respectful climate in prison, with staff displaying positive, respectful and courteous attitudes towards them.

On the other hand, the dimension with the lowest mean was Well-being ($M = 2.16, SD = 0.91$), indicating the high presence of feelings of self-reported pain, punishment



Graph 1: Female prisoners’ views of the quality of prison life in Serbia

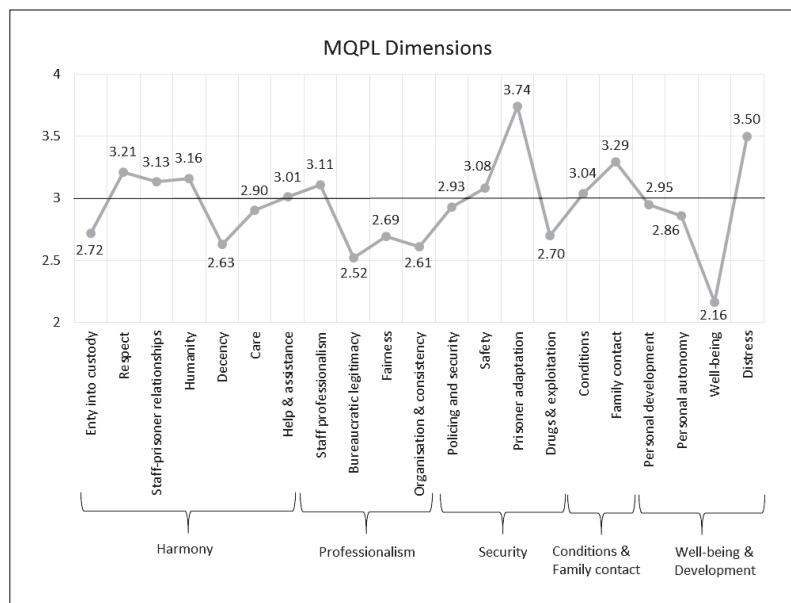
5.3 Category comparisons and analysis of differences in quality of prison life among female prisoners

When the scores on five overarching MQPL categories were compared, significant differences were found (Wilks’ Lambda = 0.51, $F(4, 87) = 20.53, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.49$). Post-hoc comparisons revealed significantly higher scores in Conditions and Family Contact ($M = 3.15$), Harmony ($M = 3.00$) and Security dimensions ($M = 3.02$) than in Well-being and Development ($M = 2.85$). The lowest score was found in Professionalism dimensions ($M = 2.76$).

Graph 2 shows the mean scores across 21 MQPL dimensions. Most dimensions showed mean scores close to the threshold of 3, indicating a neutral attitude towards the prison climate. However, there were a few noteworthy fluctuations. Prisoner adaption ($M = 3.74, SD = 0.92$) and Distress ($M = 3.50, SD = 1.03$) were the highest-ranked dimensions, suggesting that many prisoners did not feel the need or pressure to get involved in trade and alliances, nor did they experience a high level of distress. Regarding Family contact, there was a positive rating of the opportunities to maintain family

and tension among prisoners (Graph 2). The low rating for Bureaucratic legitimacy suggests a lack of transparency and responsiveness of the prison or prison system, as well as a lack of moral recognition of the individual ($M = 2.52, SD = 0.83$). Similarly, low scores in the dimensions of Organisation and consistency ($M = 2.61, SD = 0.92$) and Decency ($M = 2.63, SD = 0.89$) indicate prisoners’ dissatisfaction with the clarity, predictability and reliability of the prison system and the low extent to which the prison regime was considered reasonable and appropriate.

We conducted a series of tests to examine whether there were differences between the dimensions within each of these five categories. The first comparison confirmed significant differences among seven Harmony dimensions (Wilks’ Lambda = 0.46, $F(6, 85) = 16.88, p < 0.001, \eta^2_p = 0.54$), with significantly higher scores in Respect ($M = 3.21$), Humanity ($M = 3.16$), Staff–prisoner relationship ($M = 3.13$) and Help and assistance ($M = 3.01$) dimensions than in Entry into custody ($M = 2.72$). The lowest score was found in the Decency dimensions ($M = 2.63$). The second comparison revealed significant differences among four Professionalism di-



Graph 2: Mean scores on 21 dimensions of the Measuring Quality of Prison Life (MQPL) survey

mensions (Wilks' Lambda = 0.55, $F(3, 88) = 23.64$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = .45$). The post-hoc comparison revealed a significantly higher score in Staff professionalism ($M = 3.11$) than in the other three dimensions: Fairness ($M = 2.69$), Organisation and consistency ($M = 2.61$) and Bureaucratic legitimacy ($M = 2.52$).

Next, we found significant differences among four Security dimensions (Wilks' Lambda = 0.51, $F(3, 88) = 27.84$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.49$), with a significantly higher score in Prisoner adaptation ($M = 3.74$) than in other three dimensions: Prisoner safety ($M = 3.08$), Policing and security ($M = 2.93$) and Drugs and exploitation ($M = 2.70$). The Family contacts dimension ($M = 3.29$) was rated significantly higher than the Conditions dimension ($M = 3.04$, $t(90) = -2.00$, $p < 0.05$), with a small effect size ($\eta_p^2 = 0.04$).

Lastly, we found significant differences among four Well-being and Development dimensions (Wilks' Lambda = 0.34, $F(3, 88) = 57.88$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.66$). The post-hoc comparison revealed a significantly higher score in Distress ($M = 3.50$) than in the other three dimensions: Personal development ($M = 2.95$), Personal autonomy ($M = 2.86$) and Well-being ($M = 2.16$).

6 Discussion

6.1 Overall prison experience and differences among quality of prison life domains

The findings of this study shed light on the overall quality of prison life experienced by female prisoners in Serbia. The results revealed the relatively low general quality of prison life, with a substantial proportion of participants reporting a negative overall experience of life in prison. Only a low percentage indicated a positive perception of the quality of prison life. However, there were relatively positive experiences in the Conditions and Family Contact, Harmony and Security categories. On the other hand, the Professionalism and Well-being and Development categories received lower scores in our sample, indicating a need for attention and improvements.

First, it is necessary to have a closer look at the finding that the lowest quality of prison life is in the Professionalism and Well-being domains. In general, two groups of factors influence how prisoners adapt to and experience well-being during their time in prison. These factors fall into two main categories: imported factors, which encompass prisoners' experiences and circumstances before they enter prison, and deprivation factors, which relate to the conditions and environment they encounter within the prison itself (Slotboom

et al., 2011). Female prisoners, in particular, often bring with them extensive social and economic disadvantages, a history of prior victimisation and a higher prevalence of mental illness compared to male prisoners (Heimer et al., 2023; Tripodi & Pettus-Davis, 2013). However, research from the Netherlands suggests that the prison environment has a more substantial impact on prisoners' well-being than their prior life experiences (Slotboom et al., 2011). Deprivation factors, especially those related to how prisoners are treated by staff and other prisoners, as well as environmental stressors within the prison, play a central role in determining their well-being. Namely, the conditions and treatment prisoners experience during incarceration are critical factors influencing their overall quality of prison life. Additionally, the concept of fairness and legitimacy within the prison, encompassed in the Professionalism category of our research, strongly affects prisoners' well-being (Liebling & Ludlow, 2016). Moreover, fairness in prison is closely linked to prisoners' perceptions of the quality of treatment, including their satisfaction with prison workers and their sense of fairness in life, all of which significantly affect their well-being (Bobić et al., 2022). Notably, from the perspective of prison officers, their commitment to treating prisoners fairly is associated with their self-legitimacy or how they perceive their legitimacy and authority in their role (Meško et al., 2017). Therefore, addressing the issues identified in the Professionalism domain and recognising that the conditions and treatment prisoners experience during incarceration have a profound impact on their overall well-being is imperative for improving the overall quality of prison life and promoting the well-being of female prisoners. This finding underscores the importance of prioritising fairness, respectful treatment and professionalism in the prison environment, as these factors are pivotal in shaping prisoners' experiences and overall adjustment during their time in confinement, as suggested in previous studies.

The present study revealed seemingly contradictory findings concerning Prisoner adaptation, Distress and Well-being, with female prisoners showing high levels of prison adaptation and distress but experiencing low levels of well-being. This discrepancy can be attributed to the imported factors from prisoners' pre-prison experiences, that is, their challenging prior life experiences, which involved continuous adaptation to stressful circumstances, depression, anxiety, victimisation, substance abuse, discrimination on multiple bases and marginalisation. Several studies have highlighted that many female prisoners have faced domestic violence, abuse and early exposure to criminal activities (Cruz et al., 2023; Freiburger & Marcum, 2016; Gehring, 2018; Stanojoska, 2023). Additionally, some female prisoners became involved in criminal activities due to the influence and coercion of their partners, leading them into the criminal environment.

Together with abusive and exploitative relationships before incarceration, these experiences could contribute to their reduced expectations regarding well-being both inside and outside the prison, and relatively easy adaptation to prison life. Therefore, the perception of well-being among female prisoners should be contextualised within their past life experiences and compared to their pre-sentence well-being perceptions. Without diminishing the significance of the prison environment, our findings underscore the importance of analysing previous life circumstances, such as mental health history, self-harm risk and overall well-being of female prisoners, to gain insights into their adaptation and psychological challenges during incarceration. Addressing these factors is important, as female prisoners experiencing a stressful or unsafe environment, repression, disrespect from staff, or exclusion by fellow prisoners are facing a higher risk of psychological problems during imprisonment (Slotboom et al., 2011).

6.2 Female prisoners' experiences: Strengths, challenges and complexities

The current study has detected several areas of strength. More precisely, individual dimensions of Prisoner adaptation and Distress, along with Family contact and the perception of a respectful prison climate in Respect/courtesy, were the highest-ranked dimensions. Mapping these areas of strength, such as family contact opportunities and family support, may hold significant importance for female prisoners, as they are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of being deprived of contact with their family members, especially their children (Špadijer-Džinić et al., 2009). Moreover, female prisoners tend to experience higher levels of social support from their children (Jiang & Winfree, 2006). Prioritising and building upon these areas of strength as positive and empowering factors could potentially enhance the entire treatment and resocialisation process for female prisoners.

As regards the role of contact with family members during incarceration, family contact is, in general, considered a positive, highly ranked aspect of prison life that can be empowering. For example, research by Pettus-Davis et al. (2017) highlights the significance of maintaining positive social support relationships with family, both within the prison and in the community, as it can reduce the chances of women being reincarcerated after release. Conversely, non-family relationships during incarceration were associated with an increased likelihood of females reoffending and returning to prison. Overall, in the context of social support for female prisoners, support from friends or fellow prisoners holds less significance compared to support from family and significant others, while the family emerges as the most crucial source of social support in the lives of female prisoners (Liu & Chui,

2014). As indicated previously, many female prisoners have experienced difficult family backgrounds, including dysfunctional family dynamics and victimisation, especially partner abuse. On the other hand, the increasing number of incarcerated mothers, driven by rising women's imprisonment rates, has significant negative effects on families and long-term consequences even after incarceration, including economic hardship, disrupted relationships and children's exposure to risk factors (Heimer et al., 2023).

In this context, it raises a critical question about the role of a prisoner's family in their journey towards empowerment, resocialisation and desistance from crime. While family support can be a powerful source of motivation and strength for some prisoners, it can also be a complicating factor if the family has been responsible for victimisation and negative impacts on the prisoner's mental and physical health. This paradox highlights the complexity of family dynamics for female prisoners. It seems that some prisoners find their greatest strength also being their greatest weakness. Therefore, it is essential to differentiate between the role of female prisoners' partners or parents, who may be the cause of both victimisation and criminalisation, and their children, who always play a positive and encouraging role in their resocialisation, progress and personal growth. Female prisoners should be provided with the opportunity to recognise the difference between positive and negative or destructive behavioural patterns in family and partner relations and be encouraged to avoid harmful ones, particularly those that may lead to re-victimisation and/or re-offending.

6.3 Challenges in the prison environment: Implications for well-being, rehabilitation and intervention needs

The current study identified several challenges in various dimensions, including Well-being, Bureaucratic legitimacy, Organisation and consistency, and Decency. Participants expressed feelings of pain, punishment and tension within the prison environment, contributing to their negative perceptions of the prison system. Their dissatisfaction was further compounded by the system's lack of transparency, responsiveness, moral recognition, clarity, predictability and reliability, which led them to perceive it as unreasonable and inappropriate.

When it comes to the role of decency and its impact on prisoners' well-being, previous studies have indicated that prisoners often express concerns not only about interpersonal relationships, humanity and the legitimate use of authority but also about decency (Auty & Liebling, 2020; Neubacher et al., 2021). The absence of decency in prison can lead to psychological distress, including depression, suicidal tendencies and feelings of anger, frustration and violence, as noted

by Liebling et al. (2012). In particular, the MQPL dimension of Decency, which falls under the Harmony category, refers to how a prison operates fairly and without bias at all levels. Since prisoners' well-being and experiences during incarceration are influenced by a combination of factors, prioritising interventions that target the aspects of well-being, bureaucratic legitimacy, organisation and consistency, and decency while nurturing the positive aspects identified in family contact and prisoner adaptation would be beneficial and strategic. However, determining the most effective approach to address these issues remains a challenge.

The findings of this study underscore the lack of a supportive prison climate that prioritises moral recognition of individual prisoners, fosters supportive relationships and promotes personal growth and resilience. Within the context of identity transformation in prisons, prior research indicates that the nature of the prison environment plays a significant role in shaping prisoners' identities. A disabling prison environment tends to promote a survival identity, while a supportive and enabling one encourages a growth identity, that is, identity transformation (Liebling, 2012a, 2012b; Szifris, 2018). In terms of the relationship between the prison environment and identity transformation, the extreme conditions of life in prison may lead to the belief that the central value of life is simply the "will to live" regardless of the circumstances (Janning, 2013). However, research focused on improving the quality of prison life challenges this notion by proposing that prison treatment can establish conditions and criteria for a life worth living beyond mere survival. This approach emphasises the gradual improvement of personal abilities as an essential goal and highlights the transformative process of overcoming challenges rather than defining a specific notion of a "good life" (Janning, 2013).

Therefore, recognising and acknowledging the challenges reported by prisoners is imperative in fostering a supportive atmosphere for personal growth, rehabilitation and identity transformation within correctional facilities. Understanding these challenges is also essential as they may impact the resocialisation process, and intense prison deprivations can negatively affect prisoners' physical and mental health, undermining rehabilitation efforts (Jovanić et al., 2020; Petrović & Jovanić, 2018). By mapping and understanding these areas of deprivation, opportunities can be created to enhance the resocialisation and corrective processes within the prison system. Ultimately, this approach could contribute to reimagining and transforming the prison experience and achieving a more effective criminal justice system.

Finally, when discussing family contact opportunities, it is important to remember that barriers to receiving social

support from family, as well as from friends and prison officers, can obstruct or interrupt the reintegration process of female prisoners (Solbakken & Wynn, 2022). For example, institutional routines, time schedules and security measures could further isolate prisoners from their support networks or impede the development of a strong support system that is crucial for a successful transition back into the community upon release (Solbakken & Wynn, 2022). Comparable to the situation in neighbouring Croatia (Getoš Kalac & Bezić, 2023), there is a notable issue regarding the location of the only female prison in Serbia. This location could hinder prisoners from maintaining social and family ties through visits, which goes against Rule 4 of the Bangkok Rules (United Nations, 2010), stressing the importance of prisons being closer to prisoners' homes or places of social rehabilitation. Identifying and addressing barriers such as these is crucial to ensure that female prisoners receive the necessary support for effective reintegration and reduce their likelihood of reoffending. Family contact, highly valued by female prisoners in this research, plays a significant role in their rehabilitation and overall well-being. By removing obstacles to maintaining these important relationships, the criminal justice system can contribute to more successful outcomes for female prisoners.

6.4 Prioritising interventions and recommendations for enhancing female prisoners' well-being, rehabilitation and system improvements

Taken together, the findings reported here suggest that interventions that address the aspects of well-being, bureaucratic legitimacy, organisation, consistency and decency while nurturing the positive aspects identified in family contact and prisoner adaptation should be prioritised. To enhance the well-being and adjustment of female prisoners during incarceration, attention and improvements are needed in several areas, particularly those related to the use of authority, perception of fairness, adequacy and compliance with legal standards concerning punishments and procedures, predictability and reliability of the prison system, its transparency and responsiveness, and the moral recognition of the individual.

Comprehensive, gender-sensitive interventions are recommended to address deprivation factors such as staff treatment and environmental stress (Heilbrun et al., 2008). For female prisoners, it is essential to design holistic, strengths-based, gender-sensitive and women-centred treatment programmes that consider gender roles and women's socialisation and address their specific needs and aspirations, supporting their agency. Adopting a comprehensive perspective involves looking "at the individual's whole (challenges, strengths, talents, well-being, protective factors, etc.)" (Ronel & Segev, 2014: 1393) and viewing a woman's life as a continuum

rather than isolating different phases and aspects of her life before prison, during incarceration and after release (Nikolić-Ristanović & Čopić, 2015). By adopting this approach, correctional institutions can contribute to the transformation and betterment of female prisoners, enabling them to build a positive and constructive future.

As indicated previously, personal growth and transformation in prison are closely interconnected. True personal development relies on a transformative process that includes both internal changes in self-perception and envisioning or imagining one's future self. Within the prison context, the quality of life is significantly influenced by moral institutions, both formal and informal, which play a crucial role in shaping prisoners' experiences and the construction or reconstruction of their future selves. Creating an environment that fosters personal growth over mere survival involves promoting self-observation, self-interpretation and trust-building and providing space for positive interaction and prosocial development (Szifris, 2018).

Next, the results of this research support the idea that certain aspects of the prison's organisational design and communication systems might require attention as they could be affecting the overall operational effectiveness, particularly concerning bureaucratic legitimacy and organisation and consistency, as operationalised through the MQPL dimensions. Such a finding is expected as organisational design and communication play a vital role in the operational effectiveness of prisons (Johnsen et al., 2011). In terms of organisational design and operational effectiveness, the Serbian prison system has evolved in response to various internal and external factors, including political changes, economic challenges and international standards (Jovanić et al., 2020). Furthermore, the Serbian prison system has been facing issues related to overcrowding, economic constraints and the need for modernisation during the last thirty years (Jovanić et al., 2020). However, the prevailing paradigm in the Serbian criminal justice system is "risk management" (Vujičić & Karić, 2020). At the same time, the limitations in terms of rehabilitation programmes and the focus on maintaining order raise questions about the overall effectiveness of the prison system in Serbia when it comes to prisoners' rehabilitation and reintegration into society (Jovanić et al., 2020). As mentioned, prior research has emphasised the advantages of a decentralised and less hierarchical organisational structure in prisons. This approach underscores the significance of efficient communication and streamlined decision-making processes (Johnsen et al., 2011). This type of structure has the potential to improve flexibility, responsiveness and the efficient exchange of information and decision-making.

Without initiating complicated and time-consuming law-amendments procedures, some practical interventions for improved prison life in areas such as bureaucratic legitimacy, organisation and consistency, and decency could be implemented. In this study, participants expressed feelings of pain, punishment, tension, and dissatisfaction with the reliability, transparency and responsiveness of the prison system. These flaws are related to the legitimacy of the criminal justice authorities managing the prisons and not to the formal regulation of the enforcement of prison sanctions. The recent literature review has explored the role of procedural justice and legitimacy in prison environments and confirmed their impact on normative compliance and perceptions of incarcerated individuals (Ryan & Bergin, 2022). The legitimacy of criminal justice authorities, including those managing the prison system, is “established and reproduced through the fairness with which those authorities treat those they govern” (Jackson et al., 2010: 8). To further clarify, fairness in prisons is achieved through procedural justice, encompassing four key aspects: giving prisoners a voice in decision-making and dispute resolution; ensuring consistent and unbiased rule application; treating prisoners with respect and dignity; and fostering trust in authorities’ concern for prisoners’ well-being (Jackson et al., 2010). The evidence indicates that the fair and respectful treatment of incarcerated individuals is linked to their perceptions of prison officer and regime legitimacy, and the absence of fairness and respect may lead to negative outcomes, conflict and noncompliance, making it crucial for prison staff to prioritise procedural justice (Ryan & Bergin, 2022). To establish a fair prison system, continuous efforts to improve these aspects primarily rely on the conduct of prison staff and their interactions and communication with prisoners. Moreover, contemporary perspectives on prison life quality should extend the concept of legitimacy beyond simply accepting authority decisions and moral arguments for power relations. It should also encompass the assistance and support offered by prison authorities in helping prisoners acquire new skills and capacities for a non-criminal life after serving their sentence (Jackson et al., 2010).

Generally speaking, the improvement of the overall quality of prison life requires a holistic approach, considering the interconnectedness and overlapping of various aspects and dimensions. In doing so, potential interventions can be of two types: formal and practical. Formal interventions would involve changes and amendments to the relevant legal documents that regulate the functioning of the Correctional Institution for Women in Požarevac. On the other hand, practical interventions would encompass concrete steps, such as providing additional education and awareness-raising training to prison staff members and introducing tailored programmes for female prisoners that foster their personal

growth and rehabilitation. There should be no barriers to implementing formal and practical interventions simultaneously, as long as they are synchronised and aligned within the current legislative and strategic framework. More precisely, practical steps should complement and follow the formal changes, ensuring that the overall approach is cohesive and effective. Through the combination of formal and practical interventions, the prison system can adopt a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to improving prison life quality for female prisoners, ultimately fostering their well-being and successful reintegration into society.

In conclusion, this study highlights the overall low quality of life for female prisoners in Serbia, emphasising strengths in family contact, prisoner adaptation and a respectful prison climate while revealing the need for improvements in well-being, bureaucratic legitimacy, organisation, consistency and decency. Recognising these unique challenges, the findings provide insights for policymakers to adopt and prison practitioners to apply interventions and strategies aimed at enhancing the prison experience for female prisoners in Serbia. By addressing specific areas, the prison system can create a more supportive and rehabilitative environment, ultimately improving their quality of life during incarceration and successful reintegration into society post-release.

6.5 Strengths and limitations

The strength of the present research lies in its utilisation of the MQPL assessment tool, which prioritises the perspectives of participants over researchers’ preconceived notions of prison quality. By focusing on prisoners’ own experiences and perspectives, the research has captured a more authentic and holistic understanding of the quality of prison life, enhancing the validity and relevance of the findings. This approach, as highlighted by Liebling et al. (2012), is distinctive and valuable.

Next, this research has identified specific challenges faced by female prisoners in Serbia, covering various dimensions of prison life, including well-being, bureaucratic legitimacy, organisation, consistency and decency, which are crucial for recognising areas in need of improvement. Policymakers and prison administrators can use this information to develop gender-sensitive interventions and initiatives aimed at enhancing the well-being and adjustment of female prisoners. In addition, these findings can guide the development of targeted interventions to improve prison conditions and the overall prison experience for female prisoners. Broadly speaking, the study contributes to the growing body of gender-sensitive research within the criminal justice system. Finally, by focusing on female prisoners’ perspectives, the study empowers this

often marginalised group by giving them a voice in assessing their own experiences.

On the other hand, there are some limitations to this research. The main concern is the limited generalizability of these findings to the broader population of female prisoners in Serbia due to sample size and representativeness issues. In particular, the study had a response rate of nearly 40% among the female prisoner population in Serbia, yet used the voluntary sampling method and had a relatively small number of respondents, which restricts the potential for in-depth statistical analysis. Moreover, several aspects were not considered, such as socio-demographic characteristics, health conditions, types of offences, length of sentences and the custody conditions of the participants (e.g., cell sharing). Additional aspects such as their criminal history, access to education, vocational training, mental health services, employment histories and recreational activities could further enrich the understanding of prison life quality. Next, the study relied on retrospective data provided by the participants, which could be subject to recall bias or influenced by the current emotional state of the participants. Overall, with a small sample size, caution must be applied, as the study's insights into the experiences of female prisoners in Serbia may not directly apply to countries or regions with different prison systems and cultural contexts. Accordingly, addressing these issues could further strengthen the research on prison life quality and its relevance to both academia and policy development in the field of corrections and criminal justice.

6.6 Future research strategies

Conducting large-scale studies with a diverse and representative sample could help to improve the generalizability of findings and gain insights into different subgroups of prisoners. Including a comparison group, such as male prisoners or the general population, and participants' socio-demographic characteristics, health status, criminal history and custody profiles would enable examination of the potential correlators of the quality of prison life and a better understanding of the unique experiences of female prisoners. Exploring longitudinal changes in the quality of prison life through follow-up studies would expand our knowledge of dynamics and variations in prison experiences, considering factors that contribute to these changes, such as policy reforms and interventions. Understanding the relationship between the quality of prison life and outcomes such as mental health, well-being and recidivism can inform interventions and policies, which can further guide strategies aimed at improving the prison environment and promoting successful reintegration. Cross-cultural comparison of the quality of prison life of female prisoners in Serbia with other countries or regions would allow

the identification of unique challenges, strengths and potential areas for improvement or best practices.

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Kakovost zaporskega življenja obsojenk v Srbiji: Ključni izzivi in področja moči

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Kljub številnim razlikam med obsojenci in obsojenkami so raziskave o ženski zaporski populaciji redke, saj predstavljajo ženske majhen delež zaporske populacije po svetu. Študija se osredotoča na analizo kakovosti življenja v zaporu ter raziskovanje dimenzij znotraj petih kategorij zaporske klime s ciljem razumevanja izkušnje prestajanja kazni zopora pri obsojenkah v Srbiji. Izvedena je deskriptivna presečna študija na priložnostnem vzorcu 91 obsojenk, ki so prestajale kazen zopora v Kazensko-popravnem zavodu za ženske v Požarevcu. Uporabljen je bil Vprašalnik za merjenje kakovosti življenja v zaporih (angl. *Measuring the Quality of Prison Life – MQPL*) in enosmerna analiza variance (ANOVA) s *post-hoc* Bonferronijevimi prilagoditvami. Ugotovljene so bile pomembne variacije v ocenah zaporske klime. Celotna zaporska izkušnja je bila ocenjena relativno nizko, pri čemer je le ena četrtnina obsojenk podala pozitivno oceno. Najvišje sta bili ocenjeni dimenziji Prilagoditev obsojenke in Stiska, medtem ko so bile najnižje ocenjene Dobro počutje, Birokratska legitimnost, Organizacija in doslednost ter Dostojnost. Predlagani holistični pristop s praktičnimi intervencijami ponuja možnosti za izboljšanje kakovosti življenja v zaporih in pozitivno vpliva na počutje obsojenk, ki predstavljajo ranljivo in marginalizirano skupino v družbi.

Ključne besede: kakovost življenja v zaporih, obsojenke, Srbija, zaporski sistem, zaporska klima

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