

## A QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF COMMON CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN PRISONERS IN THAI PRISONS

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### Abstract

Over the past decade, with the influence of the women's movement, the understanding of women's lives has increased dramatically. However, knowledge of women in the field of criminal justice, is still limited. The purpose of this study is to investigate the problems experienced by women inmates related to their life in prison, as well as the relationship between factors such as age, imprisonment length, types of prisons, types of prisoners, and safety-related problems in prison. The study is a quantitative study where data was collected from women imprisoned in 20 central prisons and women's correctional institutions across Thailand. There were 2,499 samples. The findings reveal that the most common problems experienced by women prisoners are anxiety and the need for companionship, followed by health problems, concerns regarding family and maintaining contact with family, respectively. The findings from this research can be further applied to improve the management of women prisoners in order to reduce the problems they experience, as well as to enhance safety and mitigate violence in prison.

**Keywords:** Women Prisoners / Prisons in Thailand / Problems in Prisons / Challenges

### INTRODUCTION

Thailand currently has the highest female prisoner population rate (66.4 per 100,000 of the national population as of September 2017) in the world. In the past ten years, the number of female prisoners has dramatically increased. According to the Department of Corrections, the number of

female prisoners has continued to rise over the past decade and by 2020 there were 47,995 female prisoners (data collected in March 2020), which is double the figure from 2007 (23,736). Statistics from the Department of Corrections show that 80 percent of female prisoners in Thailand had committed drug-related crimes. The second most committed crime by female prisoners

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is property crime. Thus, this demonstrates that most female criminals are non-violent individuals.

In the past, statistics showed that the number of drug-related crimes committed by women was relatively small compared to men. However, today the status and role of women has changed significantly. Women are now considered equal to men. This change has allowed women to become more involved in society, family, and employment markets. That is to say, the more responsibilities women have, the higher the chance of wrongdoing and committing crimes (Chadngern and Chotchakornpant, 2016).

Among the female prisoners, there are convicted prisoners, the Court of Appeals' or the Supreme Court's in-process prisoners, under-trial prisoners, and under-investigation prisoners who are imprisoned due to either the severity of the case or a lack of collateral. The increasing number of female prisoners has led to the problem of prison overcrowding in Thailand, which severely affects the management of female prisoners. The buildings and physical environment of most prisons were designed for male inmates who were the majority population, especially in rural areas. Many prisons only had small areas for 3060 female prisoners. However, since the number of female prisoners has now risen to 200-300 per prison, there are insufficient areas to manage this rising figure. Despite the fact that more female correctional facilities or buildings have been constructed in order to provide more spaces for female prisoners, it is still not sufficient. Overcrowding, the unique environment, and strict prison rules tend to put pressure on female prisoners,

leading to changes in their behaviors (Liu and Chui, 2018).

It can be concluded that the increase in the number of female prisoners affects their quality of life in many aspects, such as residency, daily activities, career development, and sleep habits. All of these arise because of the congestion within prisons. Furthermore, due to the unique environment and the fact that they must strictly adhere to prison rules at all times some of them might not be able to adapt to life in prison, leading to problems such as boredom and discouragement during their imprisonment (Nakjaruan, 2003). This also includes anxiety caused by being separated from one's family (Pogrebin and Dodge, 2001). These problems must be resolved in order to effectively support women prisoners' participation in the rehabilitation programs provided in each prison.

Nonetheless, to solve these issues, it is important to understand the causes to genuinely improve a prisoners' quality of life. Therefore, this study aims to explore the problems female prisoners face while being incarcerated, including looking at the differences in problems within different types of prisons and for different types of prisoners. Hence, this research is beneficial for related authorities who are responsible for developing prisoners' quality of life and related rehabilitation programmes.

## **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

This study – conducted by the Thailand Institute of Justice as part of a wider National Survey on Women Prisoners in 2018 – aims to explore the daily life problems of women prisoners in prison in Thailand.

It also analyzes the relationship between the demographics of female prisoners and their problems in prison.

## METHODS

This study is a quantitative research. Data was collected by using self-reported questionnaires which were completed by female prisoners in female correctional facilities in Thailand. Personal interviews collected data from female prisoners who could not read or speak. The samples used were female prisoners from the first and second most crowded prisons or female correctional facilities from each district of the Department of Corrections; thus, there were 20 prisons in total. The number of samples in this study accounted for 5 percent of the nationwide female prisoner population. The survey was conducted in 2018. This data was collected from 2,499 female prisoners with an average age of 33.80, while the youngest samples were 19 years old, and the oldest samples were 67 years old. Most of the prisoners were Buddhist with a wide range of marital status, including ‘married’, ‘living together’, and ‘not registered’.

## RESULTS

### Problems of Female Prisoners in Thailand

The survey results show that 57% of female prisoners faced at least one problem while living in prison. According to Table 1, it can be seen that most of the female prisoners had mental health problems,

especially in terms of distress and the need to talk to someone (33.14%), followed by other problems such as physical health problems (27.59%), worries about family issues (19.69%), and communication with family members (19.58%), respectively.

**Table 1:** Percentage of Female Prisoners’ problems

Problems	Number	Percentage
1. Mental health problems		33.14
2. Worries about family	533	19.69
3. Communication with family members	530	19.58
4. Physical health problems	747	27.59

Note: *the participants can answer more than one problem*

In addition to the problems mentioned earlier, some women were also confronted by violence in prison. Therefore, this study looks at the two issues of physical abuse (hitting, slapping, kicking, punching, burning, hot water splashing, and drowning etc.) and emotional abuse (scolding, insulting, ridiculing, making one feel worthless and frightened). The survey results show that although most female prisoners had never received abuse in prison, some prisoners had been either physically (6.1%) or mentally (36.8%) abused while incarcerated. Table 2 shows that most of the abused female prisoners had been physically abused once or twice before and some of them had been physically abused more than five times. Most of the abuse was from fellow female prisoners, followed by prison officers. In terms of

emotional abuse, the majority of female prisoners had been emotionally abused more than five times, making up a similar proportion to the number of female prisoners who had been mentally or emotionally abused once or twice. Most of the abuse was committed by fellow female prisoners, followed by prison officers.

**Table 2:** Percentage of physical and emotional abuse of female prisoners

Violence Issue	Number	Percentage
Physical abuse (n = 149)		
Number of times physically abused		
1 - 2 times	98	79.0
3 - 4 times	14	11.3
More than 5 times	12	9.7
Total	124	100.0
Physical Abusers		
Prisoners	88	71.0
Prison officers	26	21.0
Both prisoner and officers	5	4.0
Myself	3	2.4
Partner in the prison	2	1.6
Total	124	100.0
Emotional abuse (n = 900)		
Number of times emotionally abused		
1 - 2 times	304	39.7
3 - 4 times	156	20.4
More than 5 times	305	39.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>765</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Emotional Abusers		
Prisoners	427	54.7
Prison officers	172	22.1
Both prisoners and officers	173	22.2
Others	8	1.0
Total	780	100.0

Moreover, the female prisoners also encountered four major problems in their daily life while in prison, as listed below:

1) Problems regarding food and drink. Unclean food and unhygienic equipment, lack of drinking water, and lack of hot water.

2) Problems regarding medical care. Insufficient medicine and health care facilities compared to the number of female prisoners and unclean facilities.

3) Problems regarding public utilities. A lack of clothes, blankets, and other kinds of equipment. This also includes prison overcrowding which leads to the lack of prison beds, toilets, and public areas.

4) Problems regarding leisure time in prison. In this aspect, even if there are leisure activities and vocational training available for the female prisoners, these activities were often not interesting, leading to a lack of participation.

### Relationship between the Current Problems in Prison and the General Information of Female Prisoners

#### 1) Mental Problem (Distress)

According to Table 3, the types of prison, the length of time spent in prison, and the female prisoners' age did not significantly correlate with the mental health of the female prisoners with a statistical significance level of 0.05. Meanwhile, the types of prisoners significantly correlated with the mental health of the female prisoners at a statistical significance level of 0.01 ( $\chi^2 = 8.266, p = 0.004$ ), in which the number of under-trial female prisoners facing mental problems (41.2%) was higher than the number of convicted female prisoners having the same problem (34.9%).

**Table 3:** The relationship between mental health problem and females' prisoner information

General information		Mental health problems				Chi-square	p-value
		No problems		Problems			
		N	%	N	%		
1. Type of prison	Female Correctional Institution	1,033	64.7	564	35.3	3.640	.056
	Central prison	514	60.7	333	39.3		
2. Types of prisoner	Convicted prisoners	1,131	65.1	607	34.9	8.266	.004
	Under-trial female prisoners	412	58.8	289	41.2		
3. Length of time in prison	Less than 1 year	512	61.0	327	39.0	6.085	.108
	1 – 2 year	384	60.8	248	39.2		
	3 – 4 year	303	64.9	164	35.1		
	More than 5 year	286	66.8	142	33.2		
4. Age group	< 25 years	267	62.2	162	37.8	2.006	.571
	26 – 35 years	637	61.9	392	38.1		
	36 – 45 years	414	64.9	224	35.1		
	> 46 years	154	65.0	83	35.0		

## 2) Worries about Family Issues

According to Table 4, the types of prisons, the amount of time spent in prison, and the female prisoners' age did not significantly correlate with the female prisoners' worries about family issues at a statistical significance level of 0.05. Meanwhile, the types of prisoners significantly

correlated with the female prisoners' worries about family issues at a statistical significance level of 0.05 ( $\chi^2 = 16.101$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), in which the number of under-trial female prisoners facing worries about family issues (27.2%) was higher than the number of convicted female prisoners having the same problem (34.9%).

**Table 4:** The relationship between worries about family problems and prisoner information

General information		worries about family				Chi-square	p-value
		No problems		Problems			
		N	%	N	%		
1. Type of prison	Female Correctional Institution	1253	78.8	337	21.2	1.082	.298
	Central prison	652	76.9	196	23.1		
2. Types of prisoner	Convicted prisoners	1391	80.3	341	19.7	16.101	.000
	Under-trial female prisoners	511	72.8	191	27.2		
3. Length of time in prison	Less than 1 year	632	75.4	206	24.6	6.160	.104
	1 – 2 year	506	80.4	123	19.6		
	3 – 4 year	371	79.4	96	20.6		
	More than 5 year	334	78.8	90	21.2		
4. Age group	< 25 years	330	76.9	99	23.1	2.567	.463
	26 – 35 years	789	77.0	236	23.0		
	36 – 45 years	507	79.3	132	20.7		
	> 46 years	188	80.7	45	19.3		

### 3) Communication with Family Members

According to Table 5, the types of prisons and the amount of time spent in prison did not significantly correlate with the communication between female prisoners and their family members at a statistical significance level of 0.05. Nonetheless, the types of prisoners ( $\chi^2 = 11.252$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) and the age of female prisoners ( $\chi^2 = 8.641$ ,  $p = 0.034$ ) significantly correlated with the

communication between female prisoners and their family members at a statistical significance level of 0.05, in which the number of undertrial female prisoners facing problems concerning communication with family members (26.1%) was higher than the number of convicted female prisoners having the same problem (19.9%). In addition, the female prisoners aged below 25 (24.5% of the total female prisoner population) tended to have this problem more than the older female prisoners.

**Table 5:** The relationship between communication with family members’ and prisoner information

General information		communication with family members				Chi-square	p-value
		No problems		Problems			
		N	%	N	%		
1. Type of prison	Female Correctional Institution	1266	79.2	332	20.8	2.012	.156
	Central prison	650	76.7	198	23.3		
2. Types of prisoner	Convicted prisoners	1392	80.1	345	19.9	11.252	.001
	Under-trial female prisoners	520	73.9	184	26.1		
3. Length of time in prison	Less than 1 year	635	75.3	208	24.7	7.456	.059
	1 – 2 year	509	80.8	121	19.2		
	3 – 4 year	372	79.7	95	20.3		
	More than 5 year	337	79.3	88	20.7		
4. Age group	< 25 years	323	75.5	105	24.5	8.641	.034
	26 – 35 years	795	77.2	235	22.8		
	36 – 45 years	504	79.0	134	21.0		
	> 46 years	200	84.7	36	15.3		

#### 4) Physical Health Problem

According to Table 6, the types of prisons and the types of prisoners did not significantly correlate with the female prisoners’ physical health problem at a statistical significance level of 0.05. The amount of time spent in prison ( $\chi^2 = 11.055$ ,  $p = 0.011$ ) and the age of female prisoners ( $\chi^2 = 21.790$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) significantly correlated with the female prisoners’ physical health problem at a statistical

significance level of 0.05. The female prisoners who had been imprisoned for more than five years (36.4%) faced physical health problems the most compared to female prisoners who had been imprisoned for a shorter period. At the same time, female prisoners aged between 36-45 years old (32.6%), similar to female prisoners aged higher than 46 years old (30.3%), also had faced physical health problems the most compared to female prisoners from other age groups.

**Table 6:** The relationship between physical health problem and prisoner information

General information		Physical health problems				Chi-square	p-value
		No problems		Problems			
		N	%	N	%		
1. Type of prison	Female Correctional Institution	1123	70.5	471	29.5	2.095	.148
	Central prison	574	67.5	276	32.5		
2. Types of prisoner	Convicted prisoners	1202	69.2	536	30.8	.161	.689
	Under-trial female prisoners	492	70.1	210	29.9		
3. Length of time in prison	Less than 1 year	587	70.0	252	30.0	11.055	.011
	1 – 2 year	459	73.0	170	27.0		
	3 – 4 year	319	67.9	151	32.1		
	More than 5 year	271	63.6	155	36.4		
4. Age group	< 25 years	314	73.2	115	26.8	21.790	.000
	26 – 35 years	744	72.3	285	27.7		
	36 – 45 years	431	67.4	208	32.6		
	> 46 years	137	53.3	706	30.3		

### 5) Physical Abuse

According to Table 7, the types of prisoners did not significantly correlate with female prisoners’ physical violence problem at a statistical significance level of 0.05. The types of prisons ( $\chi^2 = 4.024, p = 0.045$ ), the amount of time spent in prison ( $\chi^2 = 10.692, p = 0.014$ ) and the age of female prisoners ( $\chi^2 = 8.653, p = 0.034$ ) significantly correlated with female prisoners’ physical abuse problem at a statistical significance level of

0.05. The number of female prisoners who stayed in female correctional facilities and faced physical violence (6.8%) was higher than those who stayed in central prisons (4.7%). The female prisoners who had been imprisoned for more than five years (9.0%) had faced physical abuse the most as compared to female prisoners who had been imprisoned for a shorter period, while female prisoners aged below 25 (7.6%) also had faced physical abuse the most compared to other age groups as well.



**Table 7:** The relationship between physical abuse and prisoner information

General information		Physical abuse				Chi-square	p-value
		No problems		Problems			
		N	%	N	%		
1. Type of prison	Female Correctional Institution	1486	93.2	109	6.8	4.024	.045
	Central prison	810	95.3	40	4.7		
2. Types of prisoner	Convicted prisoners	1631	93.5	113	6.5	1.631	.202
	Under-trial female prisoners	663	95.0	35	5.0		
3. Length of time in prison	Less than 1 year	796	95.3	39	4.7	10.692	.014
	1 – 2 year	599	94.6	34	5.4		
	3 – 4 year	433	92.9	33	7.1		
	More than 5 year	394	91.0	39	9.0		
4. Age group	< 25 years	399	92.4	33	7.6	8.653	.034
	26 – 35 years	963	93.2	70	6.8		
	36 – 45 years	603	95.7	27	4.3		
	> 46 years	231	96.3	9	3.8		

### 6) Emotional Abuse

According to Table 8, the types of prisons and the types of prisoners did not significantly correlate with female prisoners' emotional abuse problem at a statistical significance level of 0.05. The amount of time spent in prison ( $\chi^2 = 13.514$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ) and the age of female prisoners ( $\chi^2 = 29.009$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) significantly correlated with

female prisoners' emotional abuse problem at a statistical significance level of 0.05. The female prisoners who had been imprisoned for more than five years (42.8%) had faced emotional abuse the most as compared to female prisoners who had been imprisoned for a shorter period, while the female prisoners aged below 25 (43.4%) also faced emotional abuse the most compared to other age groups.

**Table 8:** The relationship between emotional abuse and prisoner information

General information		Emotional abuse				Chi-square	p-value
		No problems		Problems			
		N	%	N	%		
1. Type of prison	Female Correctional Institution	991	61.9	610	38.1	3.391	.066
	Central prison	557	65.8	290	34.2		
2. Types of prisoner	Convicted prisoners	1114	63.6	638	36.4	.281	.596
	Under-trial female prisoners	432	62.3	261	37.7		
3. Length of time in prison	Less than 1 year	551	66.3	280	33.7	13.514	.004
	1 – 2 year	411	64.7	224	35.3		
	3 – 4 year	279	59.4	191	40.6		
	More than 5 year	249	57.2	186	42.8		
4. Age group	< 25 years	245	56.6	188	43.4	29.009	.000
	26 – 35 years	623	60.3	411	39.7		
	36 – 45 years	440	69.6	192	30.4		
	> 46 years	169	70.7	70	29.3		

**Table 9:** Summary of the Related variables

Problems and Abuse	Related Variable
1. Mental health problems	Types of prisoner
2. Worries about family	Types of prisoner
3. Communication with family members	Types of prisoner Age group
4. Physical health problems	Length of time in prison Age group
5. Emotional abuse	Type of prison Length of time in prison Age group
6. Physical abuse	Length of time in prison Age group

Regarding the summary table 9, the type of prisoners correlated with female' problems (mental health problems, worries about family, and communication with family members). Age group was directly related to all problems and abuse, except mental health problems and worries about family). However, type of prison correlated only with emotional abuse.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study of daily life challenges faced by female prisoners revealed that most of the female prisoners surveyed had experienced at least one problem during imprisonment. The most common challenges are mental health related, such as distress and the need of someone to talk to, as well as physical health problems and family related problems such as worries about family issues and communication with family members. It should be noted that mental health problems of female prisoners are widely common, as supported by prior research both at the national and international levels (e.g., Khan, et al., 1012; Shrestha, et al. 2017). It can be implied that the mental health problem has been one of the most common concerns in many countries, including the United States, Canada, and England. It has been found that 80% or two-thirds of female prisoners had mental health problems and anxiety, which led to suicide attempts (Khammanee and Supwirapakorn, 2017).

Moreover, Montasawee et al. (2018) studied the exposure to prisoners' mental health problems. The findings of their study showed that female prisoners had both mental and physical health problems such as depression, antisocial personality disorder, and anxiety. These problems were caused by the limited areas available for female prisoners and the limited communication with their families, leading to worries due to the life-changing situation. In some cases, the female prisoners could not adjust to the new environment, or they tended to consider imprisonment as a terrible, traumatic event in their life. These factors led to stress and anxiety, which affected their health. According to a study by Sompob Jamchan (2007), female

prisoners suffered from being separated from families as well as the lack of freedom and strict rules in prison. Problems regarding communication and worries about family issues could also lead to mental health issues among female prisoners because the time given for family communication is not sufficient, causing anxiety among prisoners. Wirachai Laonlongin et al. (2009) also stated that prisoners wanted to have more time with their families. Furthermore, the study also revealed that female prisoners who had been imprisoned in central prisons faced the same problems as female prisoners imprisoned in female correctional facilities. For example, they faced mental health problems, physical health problems, and family communication problems. It can be concluded that the size and the facilities of prisons did not cause any differences in terms of challenges, even though female correctional facilities have more space and activities available.

However, with regards to the differences in challenges during imprisonment, under-trial female prisoners tended to have more worries or distress, especially about their families and communication with their family members, than convicted women prisoners. In other words, under-trial female prisoners had worries about their cases during the trial since their cases were still in the process of the court. Furthermore, they had been imprisoned for a short period of time, so they had not had time to adapt to the new environment of prison. Additionally, there were differences in the rehabilitation activities between remand prisoners and convicted prisoners.

To illustrate, convicted prisoners were able to enjoy career training activities while the under-trial female prisoners could not participate in such activities. In other words,

most of the convicted female prisoners had been imprisoned long enough to be allowed to receive rehabilitation. According to Khammanee and Supwirapakorn (2017), female prisoners who had been through tests and different forms of rehabilitation had more reasons to live better lives and had a better understanding and decision-making capabilities regarding life issues. In terms of physical health, female prisoners who had been imprisoned for more than five years tended to have more physical health problems than other female prisoners who had been imprisoned for a shorter period of time. That is to say, female prisoners who had been imprisoned for a long time were affected more by problems such as congestion, poor public utilities, such as unclean food and water, lack of medicines and medical facilities, and the lack of prison beds. Spending life in such a crowded environment for a long time could affect their health.

Concerning the issue of violence, including physical abuse such as hitting, slapping, kicking, punching, burning, hot water splashing, and drowning, as well as mental abuse such as scolding, insulting, ridiculing, making one feel worthless, and frightened, it was found that most of the female prisoners tended to face more mental than physical abuse.

Considering the time spent in prison and the age of the female prisoners, it can be seen that the female prisoners who had been imprisoned for a long time had a greater amount of experience with physical and mental violence compared to those who had been imprisoned for a short period of time. This was reflected in the fact that those who had been imprisoned for longer tended to form groups and there were fights between these groups. Meanwhile, the newcomers

who were still not familiar with other female prisoners, did not join any groups or engage in interactions between prisoners, leading to lower levels of physical and mental violence. In addition, the newcomers were recruited by other prisoners, which helped them avoid conflict. In terms of the age of female prisoners, those aged below 25 experienced physical and mental abuse the most compared to older women. It can be implied from the survey results that the reason that the older female prisoners experienced less physical and mental violence was Thai culture itself, which dictates that elders are respected by people younger than them. Moreover, the older prisoners would not interact with other inmates that much. This conforms to the survey results by which violence in prison was usually committed by fellow prisoners (as well as officers for some parts). In this regard, the responsible authorities should pay attention to this issue in order to reduce violence in prison.

It should be noted that female prisoners who had experienced physical and mental violence would develop distress and other mental health problems during their imprisonment (Severson, Postmus, and Berry, 2005). Additionally, for this group of female prisoners, apart from physical and mental violence, they can also face Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which is a negative mental state caused by traumatic events (Baranyi, Cassidy, Fazel, Priebe, and Mundt, 2018; Singhussatith, Thanee, Sukhawaha, and Pimpaboot, 2020).

In summary, daily life challenges in prison reflect the female prisoners' low quality of life. Therefore, the following recommendations to improve their quality of life are made:

1) There must be improvement regarding water management, including drinking water, as well as prison facilities such as prison beds, toilets, nursing rooms, and public areas which should also be cleaner.

2) There must be improvement in food and nutrition. Healthy diets which are fresh, clean, and diverse must be adequately provided. In addition, there must be better eating regulations on punctuality and cleanliness.

3) There must be improvement in medical treatments. A variety of medicines must be sufficiently provided in a timely manner. There must be more frequent health checkups, including dental checks.

4) Due to the congestion in prison, there must be better prison and prison landscape management.

5) There must be more facilities provided such as hot/cold drinking water stations, washing lines, fans, bed sheets, and clothes.

6) Prison officers, doctors, and nurses should not use harsh language against female prisoners. Instead, they should listen to their problems and give advice.

7) There must be an extension in visitation time for family visits as well as an increase in communication channels between prisoners and their families.

8) Equality must be promoted among prisoners, including between those convicted and those under-trial. The prisoners should be classified according to their crimes.

9) There must be activities enhancing the mental health of prisoners, including counseling sessions with psychologists and religious leaders, especially during the early period of their imprisonment. There must be various sport related activities and exercises

provided for the prisoners to improve their health, particularly for elderly prisoners.

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