



Seventieth session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW70)

Priority theme: Ensuring and strengthening access to justice for all women and girls, including by promoting inclusive and equitable legal systems, eliminating discriminatory laws, policies, and practices, and addressing structural barriers

Expert Group Meeting

8-10 September 2025

“Access to justice for women and girls alleged or recognized as having infringed criminal law”

Observer paper prepared by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

Contents

Introduction	2
1. UN standards and norms in crime prevention and criminal justice	2
2. Specific approaches for enhancing access to justice for girls alleged or recognized as having infringed criminal law	6
3. Addressing the needs of women in prison	8
4. Supporting rehabilitation and social reintegration of women	10
5. Representation in the workforce of justice institutions	11
6. Meaningful engagement of individuals with lived experience.....	14
Conclusion	15



Introduction

While women are often in contact with the criminal justice systems as victims or witnesses of crime, a growing number of women enter in conflict with the law as suspects, accused and prisoners. Although women and girls make up a minority of the global prison population (around 6-7 per cent), the number of women and girls in prison worldwide has increased significantly. At the end of the 2023, over three quarters of a million women were held in prison.¹ A higher proportion of women (35 per cent) than men (19 per cent) are in prison for drug-related offences.² About 30 per cent of prisoners are held in pre-trial detention worldwide, but women in some regions face a higher risk than men of being detained.³

Beyond the basic provisions contained in CEDAW and CRC, as well as the relevant General Recommendations of the CEDAW Committee and General Comments of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, and consistent with General Assembly resolution 78/227 adopted on 19 December 2023, which encourages Member States to ensure equal access to justice for all, including through measures informed by age- and gender-disaggregated data,⁴ there is a more detailed body of UN Standards and Norms in Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice,⁵ with dedicated instruments that elaborate on concrete measures to enhance access to justice and the treatment of women and girls in conflict with the law.. A more detailed and comprehensive discussion of these issues is included in the following publications:

- UN Women, UNDP, UNODC and OHCHR, [A Practitioner's Toolkit on Women's Access to Justice Programming](#), Module 4: Women in Conflict with the Law
- UNODC, [Toolkit on Gender-Responsive Non-Custodial Measures](#)
- UNODC, [Handbook on Women and Imprisonment](#)

1. UN standards and norms in crime prevention and criminal justice

The United Nations standards and norms in crime prevention and criminal justice are normative instruments developed in intergovernmental processes and adopted by Member States by consensus. They cover a variety of issues such as access to justice, the treatment of offenders, justice for children and victim protection, as well as violence against women. Driven initially by the United Nations Congresses on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, held on a quinquennial

¹ See UNODC, [Prison Matters 2025: Global Prison Population and Trends; A Focus on Rehabilitative Environments](#) (2025); Helen Fair and Roy Walmsley, [World Female Imprisonment List \(sixth edition\)](#), 2025.

² UNODC, World Drug Report (2018), [Booklet 5 on Women and Drugs](#).

³ UNODC, [Prison Matters 2025](#) (2025).

⁴ General Assembly [resolution 78/227](#), on "Equal Access to Justice for All," adopted on 19 December 2023, A/RES/78/227. See also the report on the expert group meeting organised in line with the resolution available here: [ECN152025_CRP7_e.pdf](#)

⁵ For a compilation see UNODC, [Compendium of United Nations standards and norms in crime prevention and criminal justice](#) (2016).



basis since 1955, the development and updating of these standards and norms has been led by the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (CCPCJ) since its creation in 1992.

The standards and norms have made a significant contribution to promoting more effective and fair criminal justice structures in three dimensions. Firstly, they can be utilized at the national level by fostering in-depth assessments leading to the adoption of necessary criminal justice reforms. Secondly, they can help countries to develop subregional and regional strategies. Thirdly, globally and internationally, the standards and norms represent “best practices” that can be adapted by States to meet national needs, including in the implementation of existing obligations under international human rights law pertaining to women's access to justice.

International law requires strict separation of adults from children deprived of their liberty, to ensure treatment appropriate to their age and legal status,⁶ as well as the establishment of laws, procedures, authorities and institutions specifically applicable to children alleged as, accused of, or recognized as having infringed the penal law.⁷ As such, there is a separate body of UN standards and norms relevant to justice for children, which need to be applied in relation to girls' access to justice, who should not be treated the same as women, especially as concerns deprivation of liberty.

Table 1: UN standards and norms relevant to women in conflict with the law

Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power (General Assembly resolution 40/34, annex, of 29 November 1985)

- ✓ *Covers principles dealing with victims of crime, access to justice and fair treatment, restitution, compensation, assistance, and victims of abuse of power.*

United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for Non-Custodial Measures (The Tokyo Rules) (General Assembly resolution 45/110, annex, of 14 December 1990)

- ✓ *Sets global standards to reduce the use of pre-trial detention and imprisonment. Includes a non-discrimination clause but no provisions addressing the specific circumstances of women.*

Basic Principles on the Use of Restorative Justice Programmes in Criminal Matters (Economic and Social Council resolution 2002/12, annex, of 24 July 2002)

- ✓ *Identifies a range of flexible, adaptable and complementary measures for criminal justice systems that take legal, social and cultural circumstances into account.*

United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (The Bangkok Rules) (General Assembly resolution 65/229, annex, of 21 December 2010)

- ✓ *Applies not only to women prisoners under sentence, women suspected of having committed a crime in pre-trial detention or women who are in protective custody but also aims to reduce unnecessary detention or imprisonment of women through non-custodial measures that take into account their circumstances and typical backgrounds.*

United Nations updated Model Strategies and Practical Measures on the Elimination of Violence against Women in the Field of Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (General Assembly resolution 65/228, annex, of 21 December 2010)

⁶ ICCPR, article 10(2)(b) and(3).

⁷ CRC, article 40(3).



- ✓ Sets out guiding principles for all criminal justice responses (including victim-centred; perpetrator accountability) and strategies to improve investigations, evidentiary rules, court room procedures, and victim's rights.
- ✓ Calls for measures to take into account self-defence claims of women in investigations, prosecutions and sentences against them and for measures to eliminate violence against women who are detained for any reason.

United Nations Principles and Guidelines on Access to Legal Aid in Criminal Justice Systems (General Assembly resolution 67/187, annex, of 20 December 2012)

- ✓ Sets out principles and practical guidelines for the provision of legal aid to those in contact with the criminal justice system, including special measures to ensure meaningful access to legal aid for women, children and groups with special needs, including gender-sensitive and age-appropriate measures. (Principle 10).
- ✓ Calls States to ensure the right of women to access legal aid, including by introducing an active policy of incorporating a gender perspective into all policies, laws, procedures, programmes and practices relating to legal aid, taking steps to ensure availability of female lawyers and providing (Guideline 9).
- ✓ Calls for introducing a gender perspective to legal aid in order to ensure gender equality, safeguard the rights of women and groups in situations of vulnerability, and ensure equal access to justice for all.

United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (The Nelson Mandela Rules) (General Assembly resolution 70/175, annex, of 17 December 2015)

- ✓ Sets standards for the treatment of people in prison and in pre-trial detention, including that the focus of imprisonment should be on the rehabilitation and reintegration of the person.

United Nations Model Strategies on Reducing Reoffending (the Kyoto Model Strategies) (approved by the CCPCJ for adoption by the GA in 2025)

- ✓ Stresses that strategies must take into account the specific situations of women, including those with a history of victimization and those who are pregnant, mothers of dependent children or primary caregivers.

Table 2: UN standards and norms relevant to girls alleged as, accused of or recognized as having infringed criminal law

United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (the Beijing Rules) (General Assembly resolution 40/33, annex, of 29 November 1985) Relevant Rules: 2.1, 13.5, 26.4

- ✓ Justice should be administered impartially, without discrimination of any kind, including on the basis of sex. All rules and procedures should uphold equality and fairness in both law and practice (Rule 2.1).
- ✓ Girls under detention pending trial should receive individualized care, protection, and assistance. This includes access to social, educational, vocational, psychological, medical, and physical support, tailored to their age, sex, and personality (Rule 13.5).
- ✓ Special attention should be given to the specific needs and vulnerabilities of girls, particularly those alleged or accused of having committed offences. Under no circumstances should they receive less care, protection, assistance, or training than boys. (Rule 26.4).

United Nations Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty (Havana Rules) (General Assembly resolution 45/113, annex, of 14 December 1990) Relevant Rules: 4, 28, 29, 34, 53

- ✓ Rules should be applied impartially, without discrimination of any kind, including on the basis of sex (Rule 4).



- ✓ Girls should be separated from boys and adults at all times to reduce risks of violence, abuse, and harmful influences, and to ensure a safe and supportive environment (Rules 28, 29).
- ✓ Detention of children should only occur under conditions that take full account of their age, sex, personality, and health status, ensuring care that best meets their individual needs and protects their physical, mental, and moral well-being (Rule 28).
- ✓ Girls should be held in separate facilities or spaces, distinct from both adult women and boys, at every stage of the detention process (Rule 29).
- ✓ Accommodation, sanitation, and health services should respect the privacy and menstrual health needs of girls, ensuring that their daily living conditions uphold dignity and support their health (Rule 34).
- ✓ All searches and supervision involving girls should be carried out exclusively by trained female staff, in a manner that respects their dignity and minimizes discomfort and humiliation (Rule 53).

United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (The Bangkok Rules) (General Assembly resolution 65/229, annex, of 21 December 2010)

Relevant Rules: 16, 36-39, 65

- ✓ Institutionalization of girls should be avoided whenever possible. Rules 16 and 65 emphasize non-custodial alternatives.
- ✓ Equal access to education and vocational training should be ensured for girls in detention (Rule 37).
- ✓ Access to gender-specific services should be guaranteed, including counselling for abuse and reproductive health care (Rule 38).
- ✓ Pregnant girls should receive equivalent medical care to that provided to adult female prisoners (Rule 39).
- ✓ Girls' vulnerability should guide detention and rehabilitation decisions, considering prior trauma, mental health, and caregiving roles (Rules 41, 65).

United Nations Principles and Guidelines on Access to Legal Aid in Criminal Justice Systems (General Assembly resolution 67/187, annex, of 20 December 2012) Relevant Provisions: Principles 10, 11; Guidelines 10, 13

- ✓ Legal aid for girls should be gender-sensitive, age-appropriate, and multidisciplinary. Legal systems should adopt child-friendly mechanisms that address evolving capacities.
- ✓ Free legal assistance should be provided at all stages, including during diversion. Girls are exempted from means testing (Guideline 1(c), 10(f)).
- ✓ Legal aid providers should be trained on girls' rights and needs. Training should cover child development, trauma, and communication.
- ✓ Girls' privacy and data should be strictly protected. This includes prohibiting public disclosure of identifying information or media content.

United Nations Model Strategies and Practical Measures on the Elimination of Violence against Children in the Field of Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (General Assembly resolution 69/194, annex, of 18 December 2014) Relevant Provisions: Introduction § 3; Part 3 § 18, 38, 41

- ✓ States should establish coordinated mechanisms to systematically collect and publish data on all forms of violence against children, including those in contact with the justice system. These reports should include detailed statistics—such as arrest and prosecution rates, case outcomes, and overall prevalence—disaggregated by type of violence, age, sex, and the relationship of perpetrators to victims. Population-based surveys should supplement administrative data to provide a full picture of violence against children (para. 18(a)–(b)).
- ✓ In all detention settings, children should be separated from adults, and girls should be separated from boys, to protect them from harm and uphold their rights to safety and dignity (para. 38(c)).



- ✓ Children in detention should be assessed and classified to identify their special needs and provided with individualized protection and treatment. This includes ensuring appropriate services for girls (para. 38(e)).
- ✓ Treatment and support should be provided to children with specific needs, including girls who are pregnant, giving birth, or raising children while in detention (para. 38(f)).
- ✓ States should eliminate all forms of harassment, violence, and discrimination against girls in custody. Special attention should be paid to their heightened vulnerability and protection needs (para. 41(a)).
- ✓ Decision-making should take into account the specific needs and vulnerabilities of girls, ensuring they receive fair and appropriate treatment throughout justice processes (para. 41(b)).
- ✓ Personal searches of girls should be conducted only by trained female staff and must be carried out with full respect for their dignity and privacy (para. 41(c)).
- ✓ Non-invasive alternatives to strip and body searches should be adopted, such as scanning technologies, to prevent the psychological and physical harm associated with invasive procedures (para. 41(d)).
- ✓ Clear policies and staff regulations should be adopted to ensure girls are fully protected from gender-based abuse, including physical, verbal, and sexual harassment or violence while in detention (para. 41(e)).

2. Specific approaches for enhancing access to justice for girls alleged or recognized as having infringed criminal law

The [Convention on the Rights of the Child \(CRC\)](#),⁸ ratified by 196 States Parties, is the most universally endorsed human rights treaty in history. It marked a legal and moral turning point, affirming that every person under 18 is a full-fledged rights holder, entitled to the full range of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. The CRC decisively rejected outdated notions of children as parental property, recognizing them instead as autonomous individuals. Yet this recognition must not remain symbolic; it should be embedded in every law, policy, and practice that affects children's lives. This is especially urgent for girls, whose rights are often overlooked or diluted into generalized categories such as "women" or "women and girls." For girls, particularly those facing violence, exploitation, or criminalization, this distinction is not symbolic; it is essential. When their unique legal and developmental realities are ignored, they remain invisible to systems meant to protect them.

Neuroscience⁹ reinforces legal mandates by showing that adolescence is a distinct developmental stage marked by neuroplasticity, identity formation, and evolving impulse control. Girls' behaviours, especially those shaped by trauma or survival, are often misinterpreted. Acts like running away from abuse, resisting coercive control, or committing so-called "status offences" are too often criminalized rather than understood as adaptive responses to adversity.

⁸ United Nations, Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted 20 November 1989, entered into force 2 September 1990, 1577 UNTS 3.

⁹ UNODC and UNICEF, Policy Paper: [Rethinking Adolescence: Advancing Policy and Practice by adopting rights-based and evidence-informed approaches](#) (2024); Science Paper: [Rethinking Adolescence: Integrating neuropsychological insights with person-centred, trauma-informed responses](#); and Advocacy Brief: [Unlocking Adolescent Development Science for Effective Policy and Practice](#).



Punitive approaches not only misread adolescent development; they deepen trauma, undermining recovery, accountability and reintegration.¹⁰

International law, anchored in the CRC and the United Nations standards and norms on justice for children,¹¹ clearly obliges States to treat children differently from adults, including in the prevention of and response to violence, and in all aspects of justice, and to address the specific need and vulnerabilities of all children, including girls. This includes acknowledging their reduced culpability and providing safeguards that reflect their age, maturity, and needs. States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of the Child should establish and maintain a separate child justice system, with specialized courts, child-specific laws and procedures, distinct detention facilities, and appropriately trained professionals.¹²

Despite these obligations, justice systems across regions systematically fail children, including girls, by perpetuating three interrelated challenges:

1. *Misrecognition of agency*: Children, including girls, are still viewed as passive subjects of adult control, not as rights-holders with evolving capacities.
2. *Adult-centric responses*: Legal systems remain designed for adults, failing to incorporate scientific insights on adolescent neurodevelopment.
3. *Punitive norms*: Detention-based approaches dominate, restricting access to health, education, social protection and inclusion, rather than enabling community-based systems that foster healing, accountability, rehabilitation and reintegration.

The 2025 Advocacy Brief by the Task Force on Children Deprived of Liberty confirms that detention harms children's mental and physical health, fails to deter crime, and undermines rehabilitation and reintegration.¹³ This reality is particularly acute for girls alleged or accused of having infringed penal or criminal law. Although girls comprise only 6 per cent of detainees held

¹⁰ UNODC and UNICEF, Policy Paper: [Rethinking Adolescence: Advancing Policy and Practice by adopting rights-based and evidence-informed approaches](#) (2024).

¹¹ Please see Table 2 for key provisions specifically related to girls in the administration of justice. These are drawn from the UNODC Compendium of United Nations Standards and Norms on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, and include the following instruments: United Nations General Assembly, *Model Strategies and Practical Measures on the Elimination of Violence against Children in the Field of Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice*, resolution 69/194 of 18 December 2014. United Nations General Assembly, *United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (the Beijing Rules)*, resolution 40/33 of 29 November 1985. United Nations General Assembly, *United Nations Guidelines for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency (the Riyadh Guidelines)*, resolution 45/112 of 14 December 1990. United Nations General Assembly, *United Nations Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of Their Liberty (the Havana Rules)*, resolution 45/113 of 14 December 1990. United Nations General Assembly, *United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for Non-custodial Measures (the Tokyo Rules)*, resolution 45/110 of 14 December 1990. United Nations, *Guidelines for Action on Children in the Criminal Justice System (the Vienna Guidelines)*, annex to Economic and Social Council resolution 1997/30 of 21 July 1997.

¹² Convention on the Rights of the Child, arts 2, 3, 12, 19, 37 and 40.

¹³ United Nations Task Force on Children Deprived of Liberty, 'Advocacy Brief on Deprivation of Liberty of Children in the Administration of Justice'

(2025): www.unicef.org/media/171236/file/Reimagine%20Justice%20-%20Advocacy%20Brief%20-%20Deprivation%20of%20Liberty%20Final.pdf



in either pre-trial facilities or prisons, they endure disproportionate rates of violence, including sexual abuse, invasive searches, and humiliation, often because of failures to separate them from adults, in violation of international law.¹⁴ The risk of violence is strongly connected to the lack of separation between men and women, and between women and girls (especially in police custody and pre-trial detention).¹⁵

Despite legal standards requiring non-custodial alternatives and separation from adults, girls are frequently detained with women due to low numbers¹⁶ and a lack of dedicated facilities. The widespread conflation of “women and girls” in law and data systems obscures critical distinctions –age, developmental stage and rights– stripping both groups of protections and rights they are entitled to. It is crucial to recognize girls as a distinct legal and developmental group, not as women-in-training, but as rights-holders with unique pathways, vulnerabilities, and needs. This recognition needs to be operationalized through dedicated budgets, policies, and child-sensitive and gender-responsive practices from first contact with justice systems through to reintegration.¹⁷

Persistent failures to address children’s justice needs, particularly for girls, reveal the urgent need for systemic transformation. When we integrate adolescent brain science with child rights frameworks, justice systems can evolve into evidence-based protective, restorative spaces that reflect developmental realities. This transformation requires embedding neuroscience into laws and policies, replacing blame and punishment with healing, restoration, and meaningful participation, while building shared, holistic intergenerational responsibility across justice, health, education, and social protection sectors.

Visibility is the first crucial step toward justice. Recognizing and addressing the specific needs of girls is not a departure from equality; it is an essential prerequisite for achieving it. Only by acknowledging girls as a distinct legal and developmental group can we begin to understand their profoundly unique experiences, frequently shaped by early trauma, such as sexual and physical abuse.

3. Addressing the needs of women in prison

The human rights of women must be respected and fulfilled during periods of detention and imprisonment. Human rights treaty bodies have identified invasive body searches, including strip and body cavity searches; shackling during childbirth; discipline and punishment of women

¹⁴ United Nations, *Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty*, 2019, p. 273.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Handbook on Women and Imprisonment* (2014), pp. 38, 98–100.

¹⁷ United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 24 (2019) on children’s rights in the child justice system, CRC/C/GC/24, para. 40.



with children; sanctions for behaviour related to mental health; denial of access to mental health services; and the denial of medical care as constituting torture or ill-treatment against women for which places of detention and prisons must be held to account.¹⁸

Compliance with the relevant provisions of the Bangkok Rules and Nelson Mandela Rules is crucial to protect the rights of women in criminal justice detention and their continued access to fair and people-centred justice. This requires taking women's personal backgrounds and their needs into account to ensure effective management of facilities in addition to achieving the end goal of rehabilitation. Effective record-keeping, coordination and communication with other justice institutions is equally important, including flow of information between courts and prisons, transparency in operations and openness to bodies which have been assigned the responsibility for monitoring human rights standards. Relevant rules require for example that prisoners should be separated by sex and as a precaution against sexual violence by prison officials, women prisoners should not be left alone with male prison officials.¹⁹ Women should be granted communication and visits by counsel, family and community members, while being informed and protected from persons who may have violated their rights in the past.²⁰

Children who are in prison with their mothers must never be treated as prisoners, and decisions about whether they should be allowed to stay in prison should be informed by what would be in the best interests of the children concerned.²¹ In prison, there is a requirement for childcare and child-specific healthcare services, as well as efforts to provide an environment as close as possible to that of a child outside prison.²² Women prisoners need opportunities and facilities to meet with their children, both during their time in prison and following separation, including through visits involving extended contact with children and facilities that allow open contact between mother and child.²³

Specific measures to be taken should include and address the following aspects:²⁴

- ✓ Gender-responsive prison management
- ✓ Training and deployment of staff and institutional personnel working with women in prison
- ✓ Allocation, admission and registration procedures for women in prison
- ✓ Assessment and classification of women in prison
- ✓ Safety and security of women in prison
- ✓ Tailored activities and programmes designed for women in prison

¹⁸ See UN Women, UNDP, UNODC and OHCHR, *A Practitioner's Toolkit on Women's Access to Justice Programming*, p. 283.

¹⁹ See Nelson Mandela Rules 11(a) and 81 (A/RES/70/175, Annex).

²⁰ See Bangkok Rules 26 and 44 (A/RES/65/229, Annex).

²¹ See Bangkok Rule 49 (A/RES/65/229, Annex) and Nelson Mandela Rule 29 (A/RES/70/175, Annex).

²² See Bangkok Rule 51 (A/RES/65/229, Annex) and Nelson Mandela Rule 29 (A/RES/70/175, Annex).

²³ See Bangkok Rule 28 and 52 (A/RES/65/229, Annex) and Nelson Mandela Rule 29 (A/RES/70/175, Annex).

²⁴ See UNODC, [Handbook on Women and Imprisonment](#), pp. 23-128.



- ✓ Health care services for women in prison
- ✓ Access to legal aid and assistance for women in prison
- ✓ Facilitating contact with the outside world
- ✓ Preparation for release and post-release support for women
- ✓ Addressing special categories of women in prison, including pre-trial detainees, foreign national women, girls in prison
- ✓ Monitoring and oversight women's prisons

4. Supporting rehabilitation and social reintegration of women

Women are generally not well prepared for post-prison life due to inadequate services and resources that are directed towards their meaningful rehabilitation and economic and social reintegration. Women, especially those from disadvantaged social and economic backgrounds, tend to experience stigma from their families and communities and therefore face particular challenges upon release. Rehabilitation and social reintegration should be a process that begins from the point of sentencing, remain a priority during imprisonment or the execution of non-custodial sentences, and be carried out and supported by collaboration and partnerships among all relevant stakeholders. Key measures to be taken include the following:

- ✓ Provide a seamless transition from the custodial environment to the community, including by offering support on housing, employment and health and social welfare, ensuring training and work opportunities do not differentiate between women and men.²⁵
- ✓ Develop partnerships with organizations which can aid the process of eventual rehabilitation and engage families, employers, partner organizations and significant others in the community.²⁶
- ✓ Ensure that the competent authorities and services develop and implement a sentence plan that reflects the particular short and long-term needs of the woman.²⁷
- ✓ Utilize options, such as home leave, open prisons, halfway houses and community-based programmes, to ease women's transition from prison to liberty, reduce stigma and re-establish their contact with their families at the earliest possible stage.²⁸
- ✓ Address the root causes of women's offences through services and programmes such as counselling for survivors, substance abuse treatment and educational and vocational training to improve employment prospects, whilst taking into account the need to provide

²⁵ See the forthcoming United Nations Model Strategies on Reducing Reoffending (the Kyoto Model Strategies), Model Strategy No. 9 and para. 40.

²⁶ See, e.g., UNODC, [Toolkit on Gender-Responsive Non-Custodial Measures](#) (2020), p. 43.

²⁷ See Bangkok Rule 41(c) (A/RES/65/229, Annex).

²⁸ See Bangkok Rule 45 (A/RES/65/229, Annex).



care for children and women-only services.²⁹ Such programmes could be implemented by prison authorities, in cooperation with probation and/or social welfare services and CSOs (service providers).

Provide additional support to women who need psychological, medical, legal and practical help to ensure their successful reintegration into society, in cooperation with relevant service providers.³⁰ This includes community-based support and post-release services that reduce victimization, stigmatization, and address abandonment by their families and other obstacles to social reintegration of women upon release.³¹

5. Representation in the workforce of justice institutions

Women's participation in the workforce of criminal justice institutions is important, for protecting the rights of women and girls, including when they are victims and survivors of violence, but also when they are suspects, accused or prisoners. The growing number of women in prison has not been matched with significant improvements in the representation among prison staff, as highlighted by a 2025 UNODC report that revealed a considerable variation of the share of women employed in prisons across regions, with the highest share of women among all prison staff at 35 per cent in countries with data in Europe and the lowest at 20 per cent in countries with data in Africa and Asia.³² Gaps in female personnel are even greater in the police, with women making up only 17 per cent of the workforce in 2021, whereas prosecution services and the judiciary in some regions include over 50 per cent female prosecutors or judges and magistrates.³³ In response to this challenge, a growing number of police services have adopted policies to enhance the recruitment, retention and promotion of women.³⁴ Additional challenges derive from gaps in the representation of women at leadership or decision-making level in the different criminal justice institutions.

²⁹ See Bangkok Rule 60 (A/RES/65/229, Annex).

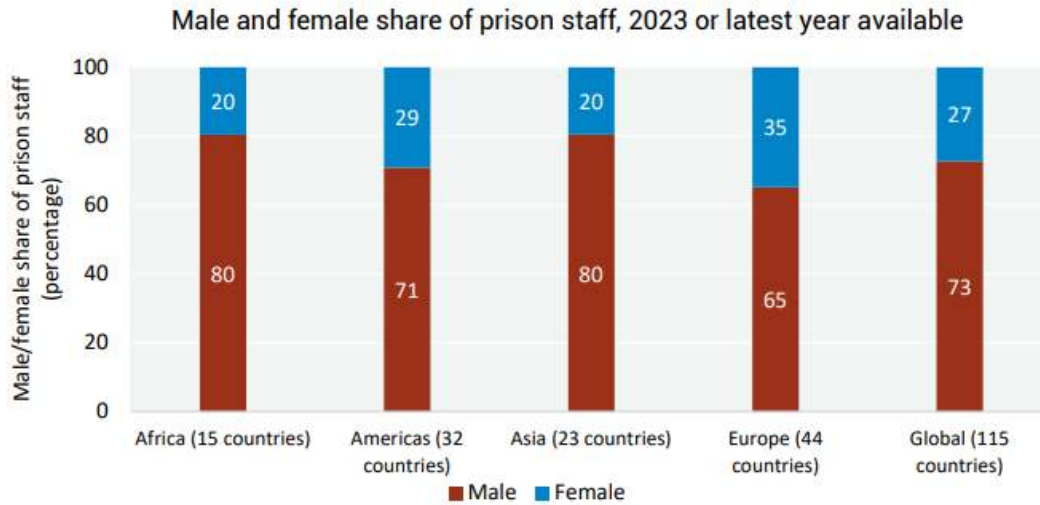
³⁰ See Bangkok Rules 46-47 (A/RES/65/229, Annex).

³¹ For examples, see UNODC, [Toolkit on Gender-Responsive Non-Custodial Measures](#) (2020), p. 54.

³² UNODC, [Prison Matters 2025: Global Prison Population and Trends: A Focus on Rehabilitation](#) (2025), p. 25.

³³ See *dataUNODC, Criminal Justice Personnel*; UNODC, [Global Study on Homicide 2023](#), p. 156.

³⁴ See, e.g., Tim Prenzler (ed.), *Gender Inclusive Policing: Challenges and Achievements* (New York and London: Routledge, 2023), Rigaux, C., & Cunningham, J. B. (2020). Enhancing recruitment and retention of visible minority police officers in Canadian policing agencies. *Policing and Society*, 31(4), 454–482; John Motsamai Modise, Inclusive Leadership in the South African Police Service (SAPS), *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, Volume 9, Issue 3, March 2024.



Notes: Regional and global figures are averages of countries with data weighted by their population. The global figure includes one country from Oceania.

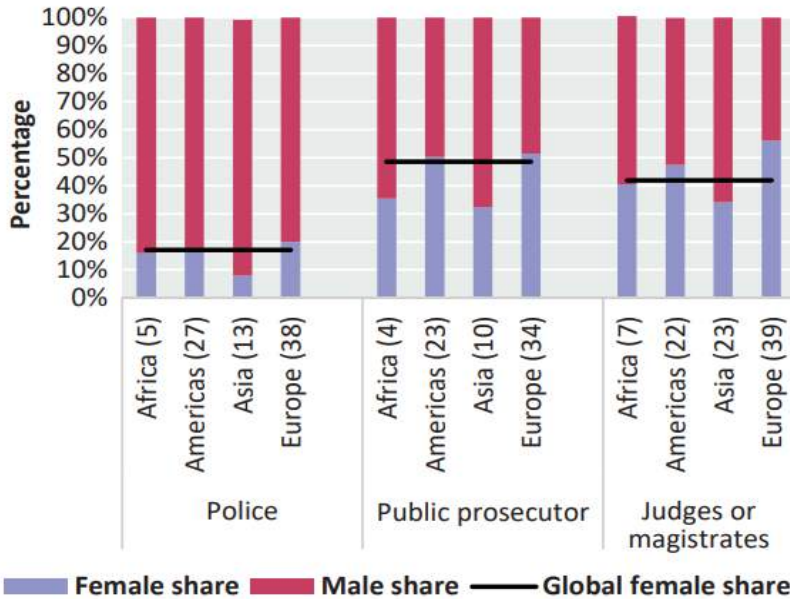
Source: UNODC, responses to the United Nations Survey of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems.

35

(Source of graph: UNODC, [Prison Matters 2025: Global Prison Population and Trends; A Focus on Rehabilitative Environments](#) (2025), p. 26.)



Average share of women in the criminal justice system in selected regions, 2021 or latest year since 2015



Source: UNODC homicide statistics.

Note: Regional and global shares are based on unweighted average shares in countries with data. The global female shares of police and judges or magistrates include one country from Oceania. Number of countries in brackets.

(Source of graph: UNODC, [Global Study on Homicide 2023](#), p. 156.)

Enhancing the representation of female professionals at all levels in police and justice institutions is important. Key measures to be **considered** by prison/detention facilities services and other criminal justice institutions include the following:

- ✓ Consider establishing and enforcing a clear and sustained commitment at the managerial level to prevent and address discrimination against women staff.³⁶
- ✓ Encourage equal access to training as male staff, and dedicated training on age and gender sensitivity and prohibition of discrimination and sexual harassment.³⁷

³⁶ See Bangkok Rule 30 (A/RES/65/229, Annex).

³⁷ See Bangkok Rule 32 (A/RES/65/229, Annex).



- ✓ Promote the representation of women in the police force and other agencies of the justice system, particularly at the decision making and managerial levels.³⁸
- ✓ Invite measures to provide women access to senior positions with key responsibility for the development of policies and strategies.³⁹
- ✓ Ensure that, where possible, female lawyers are available to represent female defendants, accused and victims.⁴⁰ It is recommended that this includes removing financial barriers to legal education and affirmative action measures to ensure access for women, girls, minorities and economically disadvantaged groups.⁴¹
- ✓ Encourage that female staff are be available and properly trained to conduct personal searches of girls deprived of their liberty.⁴²
- ✓ Consider ensuring prison/detention staff are trained on the specific needs and rights of women and girls deprived of liberty, including basic women's and children's health care. Personal searches of women prisoners should "only be carried out by women staff who have been properly trained in appropriate searching methods and in accordance with established procedures".⁴³ For girls specifically, personal searches should only be conducted by trained female staff, with dignity and privacy, using non-invasive alternatives where possible (see table 2, UN standards and norms, A/RES/69/194, annex, paras. 41(c)–(d)).
- ✓ Encourage law enforcement agencies and criminal justice institutions, where feasible, to systematically collect, analyze, and disseminate gender-disaggregated data to promote transparency, inform policymaking, and ensure safeguards for the protection of personal data.⁴⁴

6. Meaningful engagement of individuals with lived experience

Beyond policies aiming at enhancing the representation in criminal justice institutions, another crucial enabler of access to justice is the meaningful engagement of women and girls with lived experience of detention facilities and criminal justice systems. As noted by a recent UNODC report, four in five prison administrations report having a dedicated prisoner rehabilitation strategy, and while almost half of them engaged prisoners as stakeholders during planning, prison policies remain male-centric and criminal justice policies often do not provide sufficient

³⁸ Updated Model Strategies and Practical Measures on the Elimination of Violence against Women in the Field of Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (A/RES/65/228, Annex), para. 16(k).

³⁹ See Bangkok Rule 29 (A/RES/65/229, Annex).

⁴⁰ See UN Principles and Guidelines on Access to Legal Aid in Criminal Justice Systems (A/RES/67/187, Annex), para. 52(b).

⁴¹ See UN Principles and Guidelines on Access to Legal Aid in Criminal Justice Systems (A/RES/67/187, Annex), paras. 65-66.

⁴² See UN Model Strategies Practical Measures on the Elimination of Violence against Children in the Field of Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (A/Res/69/194, Annex).

⁴³ See Bangkok Rules 19 and 32-33 (A/RES/65/229, Annex).

⁴⁴ Recommendations of the UNODC Expert Group Meeting on Equal Access to Justice for All, held in Brasília, Brazil, from 9 to 11 December 2024, pursuant to General Assembly resolution 78/227 of 19 December 2023.



entry-points for non-custodial measures for women offenders that would reflect the circumstances of their offences and their typically lower security risk profile.⁴⁵ The importance of involving individuals with lived experience in the context of rehabilitation and reintegration into society was stressed by the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice in its Resolution 34/2.⁴⁶ While the inclusion of victims and survivors in the development of policies concerning justice responses to violence is a growing trend, especially trafficking in persons and violence against children,⁴⁷ additional efforts are needed to support and sustain initiatives, networks and CSOs led by women with lived prison experience,⁴⁸ which hold considerable expertise and should be involved as key partners in all efforts to enhance women's and girls' access to justice, from law and policy reform to budgeting and implementation.

Conclusion

Enhancing access to justice for women and girls who are alleged as, accused of, or recognized as having infringed the criminal law requires a holistic approach that includes and empowers those in conflict with the law. While women and girls in detention face particular hardship and situations of vulnerability, a broader focus is required, to address their justice needs before, during and after imprisonment, thereby engaging in a meaningful way - whenever feasible - individuals with lived experience.

⁴⁵ UNODC, [PRISON MATTERS 2024: Global Prison Population and Trends; A Focus on Rehabilitation](#).

⁴⁶ E/2025/30, p. 38.

⁴⁷ See, e.g., United Nations Global Forum for Human Trafficking Survivors (Vienna, 24-25 June 2025); OAS, Regional Guidelines for the Social Inclusion of Survivors of Trafficking in Persons in the Americas (Document reviewed by the Member States during the consultations made in the framework of the Working Group on Trafficking in Persons 2022-2023), Section 4.1.3; OSCE ODIHR, Guidance on establishing and maintaining National Survivors of Trafficking Advisory Councils (2024); OSCE ODIHR, Including the voices of hate crime victims in policymaking and policy implementation – a practical guide (2024); Council of Europe, Guidelines for policy makers on engaging with victims and survivors of child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse (2024).

⁴⁸ See, e.g., International Network of Formerly Incarcerated Women, <https://theinfw.com/>; Women Beyond Walls and PRI, From poverty to punishment (2025); Sisters Inside Australia, For Women, <https://sistersinside.com.au/for-women/>; New Zealand Department of Corrections, Thematic Report: The Lived Experience of Women in Prison (2021); Vera Institute of Justice, Women with Lived Experience in the Criminal Legal System Must Lead the Way, 21 May 2021; NHS England, A review of health and social care in women's prisons (2023); Penal Reform International, 10 Point Plan on Involving people with lived experience in criminal justice reform (2024).