

Women Beyond Walls Podcast, Season 2 Fact Sheets Women, prison and violence

This factsheet was compiled by Jo Baker, a social justice strategist, in October 2025

“I never met a counsellor or a therapist in prison. Women that have been victims of domestic abuse, abused, lost their children, and there is nothing in place for them like therapy... There is nothing like this in prison.” – Prison resident, UK^[1]

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a major factor in the detention and imprisonment of women because it harms them differently and disproportionately compared to men. Because of this, it is central to debates on how women are treated in criminal legal systems – and how such systems need to change so that they prevent harm, rather than cause it.

In the UK nearly 60% of women in prison report having experienced domestic abuse, compared to 27% of men ([Ministry of Justice Female Offender Strategy](#), 2018). One in three women in prison have reported experiencing prior sexual abuse. ([The Corston Report](#), 2007)

A study of women sentenced for drug and/or alcohol related offences in Australia found that 87% were victims of sexual, physical, or emotional abuse. ([Australian Institute of Criminology](#), 2004).

In a study by the [US Bureau of Justice Statistics](#) one in four women said they had been sexually abused before age 18 compared to one in 20 men. Overall, a third of women in State prison said they had been raped before their sentence (1999).

What is gender-based violence?

Definitions of gender-based violence (GBV) explain that it is an abuse of power and privilege, most commonly carried out by men against women as a way to subdue, subjugate and control them.

Globally, almost one in three women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence at least once in their life.^[2] This is made possible by women’s unequal status in society. GBV flourishes most in societies where discrimination is greatest – where women have less access to resources, justice and support and where social norms allow violence against them to happen. It makes it much harder for them to fight inequality.

GBV can be committed by individuals, societies and the State. It can include cases, for example where so-called ‘honour’ violence is condoned, where women are barred from accessing sexual and reproductive care, where laws are weak and where GBV is simply seen as a low priority issue.

Women who face extra discrimination – due to their ethnicity, their poverty, or their disability for example – are particularly at risk. ^[3]

[1] HM Prison and Probation Service, UK (2023) [A review of health and social care in women’s prisons](#)

[2] For UK figures on domestic abuse specifically, see the [Office of National Statistics](#)

[3] For further definitions explore [the Scottish Woman’s Rights Centre](#), the WHO or these [UN Women](#) FAQs. For more information on tackling violence around the world, [UN Women’s Global Data on violence against women](#).

A shortcut to imprisonment?

“Gender-based violence throughout women’s lives can undermine the protective factors that safeguard them, such as education, employment, healthcare and social networks. That... can, in turn, increase their risk of criminal behaviour and related incarceration, post-release breakdown, reoffending and reimprisonment.” - Report of the UN Working Group on discrimination against women, 2019

Research now increasingly demonstrates the ways in which violence is a shortcut to prison for women.

Women are most commonly imprisoned for economic crimes, drug or trafficking-related crimes, sex work, and for killing family members. These contexts – particularly poverty, sex work, organised crime and abusive families – have strong links with gender-based violence.

Four major themes

Discriminatory laws

As a new UN report (2025) highlights, the imprisonment of women is increasing rapidly, due to discriminatory laws, discrimination in how laws are applied, and the criminalisation of certain acts – such as abortion, sex work or, sex outside of marriage, often qualified as ‘moral’ crimes in certain societies.

Domestic violence

One 2014 UN report drew on research from around the world and, among the cited studies, found that: of the women imprisoned for killing someone close to them, 67% had been abused by the victim and that 66% of women reported as ‘physically aggressive’ towards their partners believed they were acting in self-defence. In Kyrgyzstan, a report noted that 70% of women convicted of killing a family member had a “longstanding pattern of physical abuse or forced economic dependence” while reports on Tajikistan suggest that most women convicted of murder had killed their partners in self-defence, as did studies in the UK, US, Australia, Canada and South Africa.



Coercion

A vast proportion of relationships around the world between men and women are unequal, and many involve coercion. One study cited in a [UN report](#) illustrates the strong link between violent relationships and the coercion of women by their male partners to commit crimes ranging from shoplifting and cheque fraud to prostitution and drug sales. [In Mexico](#) it is estimated that at least 40% of women convicted of drug crimes were coerced to do so by their boyfriends or husbands. According to another [report](#), 35% of imprisoned women have been sentenced for drug-related offences, often without consideration of coercion or economic vulnerability.

Poverty

Women are overrepresented amongst the poor and have a much harder time accessing economic opportunities and resources. This puts them at more risk of gender-based violence and can be seen as a form of systemic economic violence. As [one recent study shows](#), women in poverty are commonly criminalised for actions taken to sustain themselves and their families, such as begging, petty theft, the informal economy and debt. For example, in England and Wales, shoplifting – or ‘theft from shops’ – accounted for 40% of women’s prison sentences of less than six months in 2023, compared to just 22 percent of men’s. In Egypt, an estimated 20-25% of women in prison are as a result of debt, facing prison sentences of between three and 16 years.

