

Multilateral Meeting

Women in Prisons: Enhancing Gender-Sensitive Prison Policies and Practices in Council of Europe Member States

Strasbourg, 12-13 November 2025

Concept Note

Overview:

Although women and girls constitute a minority of the global prison population, they face distinct challenges that require tailored policies and practices. With over 740,000 incarcerated women worldwide — a figure that has risen by nearly 60% since 2000 — there is an urgent need for gender-sensitive prison management, specialised programmes, and community-centred alternatives to custody. In contrast to this global trend, Europe has seen a 13% decrease in its female prison population, with women now accounting for 5.9% of all prisoners.¹ However, significant challenges persist in many European countries, and this overall decline conceals ongoing concerns.

According to the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) standards² this can render it very costly for States to make separate provision for women in custody, with the result that they are often held at a small number of locations (on occasion, far from their homes and those of any dependent children), in premises which were originally designed for (and may be shared with) male detainees. In these circumstances, particular care is required to ensure that women deprived of their liberty are held in a safe and decent custodial environment.

¹ Krabbe, M., & van Kempen, P. H. (2017). Women in prison: A transnational perspective. In P. H. P. H. M. C. van Kempen & M. J. M. Krabbe (Eds.), *Women in prison: The Bangkok Rules and beyond / Femmes en prison. Les règles de Bangkok et au-delà* (pp. 3–34). Intersentia.

² European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT), Women deprived of their liberty: Extract from the 10th General Report of the CPT (CPT/Inf(2000)13-part), 2000, <https://rm.coe.int/16806cd381>.

Research shows^{3 4} that women differ from men not only in the reasons they offend but also in their experiences while in prison, requiring distinct support for their health⁵, wellbeing, and safety. Female offenders often have unique gender-specific needs related to histories of abuse, mental health issues, substance dependency, caregiving responsibilities, and risks of post-release victimisation. Recognising and addressing these needs is essential to providing appropriate support.

This multilateral meeting will build on the standards developed by the CPT⁶ that range from appropriate accommodation, access to activities, hygiene, health, pre and post-natal care, gender sensitive management and contacts to outside world as a continuation of the minimum framework set at the global level in the [Bangkok Rules](#). It will explore best practices, identify gaps, and discuss further actions required to meet the specific needs of women in prison.

The meeting will focus on key issues aimed at improving both the treatment and rehabilitation of women offenders. Central themes include the complex socio-economic and psychological pathways that lead women into the criminal justice system, particularly the profound impact of domestic and sexual abuse. Many women are drawn into offending through coercive or abusive relationships, and inadequate responses by the criminal justice system often exacerbate their victimisation, perpetuating cycles of abuse and offending.

Gender-sensitive approaches to prison practice will be highlighted, including specialised staff training, safeguarding women's health, and maintaining family connections. The conference will also emphasise the importance of rehabilitation programmes tailored to women's lived experiences and examine non-custodial alternatives that facilitate reintegration and reduce reoffending.

Key objectives of the multilateral meeting include:

- Commemorating the 15th anniversary of the [Bangkok Rules](#) by raising awareness of the unique challenges faced by women in prison
- Promoting a deeper understanding of the implementation of standards developed by the Council of Europe and the CPT
- Facilitating the exchange of good practices on gender-sensitive prison management and fostering open dialogue on rehabilitation tools and interventions that address the root causes of women's offending
- Strengthening collaboration among stakeholders dedicated to improving the treatment and long-term outcomes for women in prison
- Supporting and promoting women in leadership roles within prison administrations, recognising their crucial role in advancing sustainable, gender-responsive action (side workshop to take place after the official meeting).

³ Krabbe, M., & van Kempen, P. H. (2017). Women in prison: A transnational perspective. In P. H. P. H. M. C. van Kempen & M. J. M. Krabbe (Eds.), *Women in prison: The Bangkok Rules and beyond / Femmes en prison. Les règles de Bangkok et au-delà* (pp. 3–34). Intersentia.

⁴ Leote de Carvalho, M. J., Duarte, V., & Gomes, S. (2021). Female Crime and Delinquency: A Kaleidoscope of Changes at the Intersection of Gender and Age. *Women & Criminal Justice*, 33(4), 280–301. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08974454.2021.1985044>

⁵ van den Bergh, B. J., Gatherer, A., Fraser, A., & Moller, L. (2011). Imprisonment and women's health: concerns about gender sensitivity, human rights and public health. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 89(9), 689–694. <https://doi.org/10.2471/BLT.10.082842>

⁶ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT). (2018, January). *Women in prison* (Factsheet, CPT/Inf(2018)5). Council of Europe.