



International Journal of Advance Studies and Growth Evaluation

Towards an Equitable Global Order: India's Role in Shaping International Norms on Criminal Justice and the Rights of Women Prisoners

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Article Info.

E-ISSN: 2583-6528

Impact Factor (QJIF): 8.4

Peer Reviewed Journal

Available online:

www.alladvancejournal.com

Received: 04/May/2026

Accepted: 07/June/2026

Abstract

Amid a multipolar and fragmented global order, India asserts normative leadership as a voice of the Global South, promoting equitable reforms in international institutions and transnational challenges. This paper analyzes India's contributions to global criminal justice standards, centering on the rights and treatment of women prisoners—a group whose gender-specific vulnerabilities demand inclusive normative frameworks. Grounded in the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (Bangkok Rules, 2010) and the Nelson Mandela Rules (2015), the discussion highlights India's domestic integration of these standards via the Model Prisons and Correctional Services Act, 2023. This Act dedicates provisions to separate accommodation for women, care for pregnant prisoners and those with children, and mechanisms addressing sexual harassment—advancing gender-responsive prison administration, rehabilitation, and alternatives to incarceration. Through adaptive diplomacy and strategic autonomy, India projects these reforms internationally via UNODC partnerships (e.g., 2025 consultations emphasizing dignity, health, and rights) and South-South cooperation, sharing capacity-building insights with partners in Asia, Africa, and beyond. Such efforts critique and balance Western-dominated norms, fostering more representative global governance. Persistent challenges—such as prison overcrowding (often exceeding 150% capacity) and uneven implementation—underscore opportunities for stronger multilateral advocacy. By bridging national reforms with global standards, India enhances stability in human rights-related global commons, reinforcing its role as a normative actor and development partner in an equitable world order.

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Keywords: Equitable global order, International criminal justice norms, Women prisoners' rights, Bangkok Rules, Nelson Mandela Rule

Introduction

The contemporary international order is undergoing a structural transition marked by the gradual shift from Western-centric institutional dominance to a more diffused, multipolar configuration. This transition has simultaneously generated a crisis of legitimacy for established global governance frameworks, particularly in domains where universal norms inadequately account for socio-cultural and economic diversity. Within this context, emerging powers such as India are increasingly asserting themselves not only as participants but as contributors to global norm-setting processes. India's foreign policy orientation—grounded in the principles of strategic autonomy and the civilizational ethic of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*—has enabled it to articulate a

distinctive normative position that foregrounds equity, inclusivity, and context-sensitive governance. This positioning is particularly visible in India's engagement with Global South concerns, where it seeks to bridge the gap between universal human rights frameworks and lived realities in developing societies. One such underexplored yet analytically significant domain is that of women prisoners within the broader criminal justice system. Despite constituting a numerical minority, women in custodial institutions represent a disproportionately vulnerable group, facing structural disadvantages including gender-based violence, inadequate healthcare, reproductive and mental health neglect, and the erosion of familial and caregiving roles. Existing international standards—while normatively

robust-often reflect assumptions rooted in Western institutional contexts, thereby limiting their applicability in diverse socio-legal settings.

It is within this gap that India's evolving approach becomes analytically significant. Recent legal and policy developments, including the transition from colonial-era penal frameworks to the *Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita*, signal an attempt to reconfigure criminal justice in a manner that is both rights-oriented and contextually grounded. Simultaneously, India's engagement with international platforms reflects a growing willingness to project these domestic experiences into global normative debates.

This paper conceptualizes India's role as that of a "normative entrepreneur," engaging in a dual process of internal reform and external norm articulation. Rather than positioning itself in opposition to existing global standards, India's approach can be understood as an effort to expand and recalibrate them by incorporating perspectives from the Global South-particularly in relation to marginalized groups such as women prisoners.

Methodologically, the paper integrates empirical evidence on prison conditions, doctrinal analysis of legal frameworks, and geopolitical interpretation of India's multilateral engagements. Through this interdisciplinary approach, it argues that India's contributions extend beyond compliance with international norms toward an active role in reshaping them. In doing so, India not only challenges the limitations of Eurocentric universality but also advances a more plural, inclusive, and equitable framework for global criminal justice governance.

Objectives of the Study

This study is guided by a focused inquiry into the intersection of gender, criminal justice, and global norm-making, with India as a case in point. Rather than adopting a broad descriptive approach, the paper seeks to engage with the following specific objectives:

- To examine how India interprets and adapts international standards on women prisoners-particularly the United Nations Bangkok Rules and the Nelson Mandela Rules-within its domestic legal and institutional framework.
- To interrogate the gap between normative commitments and ground-level realities by analysing the conditions of women prisoners in India using data from the National Crime Records Bureau, with attention to structural and gender-specific vulnerabilities.
- To explore whether and how India's domestic experiences inform its international engagements, particularly in shaping a more context-sensitive and inclusive discourse on criminal justice within global governance forums.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following key research questions:

1. How does India interpret and adapt the gender-specific provisions of the United Nations Bangkok Rules (2010) and Nelson Mandela Rules (2015) within its domestic legal and institutional framework, particularly through instruments such as the Model Prisons and Correctional Services Act, 2023?
2. To what extent do normative commitments in international standards and domestic legislation align with or diverge from the ground-level realities of women prisoners in India, as evidenced by National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data on structural conditions

(e.g., overcrowding, dedicated facilities) and gender-specific vulnerabilities (e.g., health, family separation, undertrial delays)?

3. In what ways do India's domestic experiences with women prisoners-both achievements and shortcomings-influence its international engagements, and to what degree do these engagements contribute to a more context-sensitive, inclusive, and equitable discourse on criminal justice within global governance forums such as UNODC platforms and South-South cooperation?

Review of Literature

1. A key institutional contribution is the *Handbook on Women and Imprisonment* (2014) by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, which provides a comprehensive operational framework for translating the Bangkok Rules into domestic practice. The handbook outlines practical measures relating to healthcare, custodial conditions, and mother-child arrangements, while also identifying select Indian practices as emerging models. Despite its depth, the work remains largely technical in orientation and does not engage with the broader question of how states like India contribute to shaping international norms.
2. From a critical perspective, Rosemary Barberet and Stephanie Jackson (2017), in their study on a gendered critique of the Bangkok Rules, interrogate the underlying assumptions embedded within these standards. While acknowledging their progressive recognition of women's vulnerabilities, the authors caution against essentialised constructions of femininity and highlight the limited engagement with intersectionality. However, their analysis remains largely situated within a global theoretical framework and does not extend to examining how non-Western states reinterpret these norms through domestic legal processes.
3. In the Indian context, Garud and Bondar, *Women Prisoners and Their Rights: Special Need to Concern* (2024), offer a detailed doctrinal examination of the Model Prisons and Correctional Services Act, with particular emphasis on provisions relating to women prisoners. Their analysis highlights important safeguards concerning accommodation, maternal care, and institutional redressal mechanisms. While this work is significant in mapping legislative developments, it remains confined to a domestic legal perspective and does not address India's engagement with global norm-setting processes.
4. Similarly, Mohd Faraz Hasan, *Power Dynamics and the Failure of Reform: Systemic Obstacles to Genuine Justice in Urmila Shastri's Memoir* (2025) draws attention to the structural constraints that continue to undermine the realization of gender-sensitive justice in India. The study points to persistent challenges such as overcrowding, uneven implementation across states, and institutional limitations, thereby reinforcing the gap between normative commitments and empirical realities. Recent analytical works further corroborate these concerns, particularly in relation to the high proportion of undertrial women and the limited availability of gender-specific correctional facilities.

Research Gap

A close review of the existing literature shows an important gap in the way international standards on women prisoners

are studied. Most works treat these standards as norms created at the global level and then implemented by individual states. In this framework, countries like India are largely seen as recipients of norms rather than as actors capable of shaping them. Such a one-way understanding does not fully capture the changing nature of the global order, where emerging powers are increasingly participating in norm-building processes. In the Indian context, scholars have engaged extensively with recent legal and policy developments, particularly the Model Prisons and Correctional Services Act, as well as with the practical challenges of implementation. However, this body of work remains largely confined to the domestic sphere. There is limited analysis of how these internal reforms inform India's role beyond its borders, especially in terms of contributing to international discussions and standards on criminal justice.

What remains insufficiently explored is the connection between three key dimensions: domestic legal reforms, the actual conditions of women prisoners, and India's engagement in international platforms such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Without bringing these elements together, it is difficult to assess whether India's role is limited to compliance or whether it reflects a more active and influential position in shaping global norms.

This study addresses this gap by linking these dimensions and arguing that India's approach goes beyond mere implementation. Instead, it reflects an emerging form of normative engagement in which domestic experiences contribute to broader global discussions. In this sense, the paper positions India as an important factor in the ongoing effort to make criminal justice norms more inclusive and representative in a multipolar world.

Situating Gender-Responsive Standards: The Bangkok Rules and Nelson Mandela Rules

Modern international rules on how prisoners should be treated now recognize that treating everyone the same is not enough. Prisons were mostly designed with men in mind, so they often fail to meet women's different needs.

The United Nations Bangkok Rules (adopted in 2010) mark an important change. These rules focus specifically on women prisoners and their unique challenges. They pay attention to things like family caregiving roles, past experiences of abuse or violence, and health needs related to pregnancy and motherhood.

Key Parts of the Bangkok Rules Include:

- Better medical care during pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding.
- Arrangements for mothers to stay close to their young children (like crèches in prisons).
- Greater use of non-prison options (such as community service or probation) for non-violent offenders, especially women who are main caregivers-this helps avoid breaking up families.

The Nelson Mandela Rules (updated in 2015) support these ideas. They set basic standards for all prisoners, including no discrimination, healthcare equal to what people get outside prison, and female staff to supervise women's sections (except in emergencies). Together, these two sets of rules create a strong framework: general rules for everyone plus special attention for women's needs.

These rules are especially important because women's imprisonment is rising fast around the world. Since 2000, the number of women and girls in prison has increased by about

57% (from roughly 466,000 to over 733,000–759,000 today), compared to only a 22% rise for men. Women now make up around 6.8% of the global prison population. This faster growth-driven by strict drug laws, poverty-related crimes, and gender biases-shows that many prison systems still do not handle women's needs well.

This is where India's approach becomes interesting. India does not simply copy these international rules word-for-word. Instead, it adapts them to fit its own social and cultural context. For example, India emphasizes family connections, rehabilitation, and community-based alternatives that match its strong family and community values.

This is not about rejecting global standards-it's about adjusting them thoughtfully. It questions a key idea in today's multipolar world: Do countries like India just follow Western-style prison models, or can they help improve and expand these global norms by bringing in perspectives from the Global South that better suit diverse societies?

Domestic Operationalization of Gender-Responsive Norms: The Model Prisons and Correctional Services Act, 2023

The Model Prisons and Correctional Services Act marks a significant departure from the colonial framework of the Prisons Act, shifting the focus from mere custody to correction, rehabilitation, and rights-based governance. While prisons remain a State subject, the Model Act provides a uniform template aimed at aligning domestic prison administration with contemporary international standards. It's most substantive contribution lies in the gender-specific provisions articulated under Chapter X.

Key Provisions Relating to Women Prisoners

Section 30: Institutional Segregation and Gender-Sensitive Infrastructure

This provision mandates the physical and administrative separation of women prisoners, including the requirement of exclusive or dedicated spaces and the presence of female staff. It goes beyond spatial segregation by implicitly recognising the structural risks faced by women in mixed custodial environments. The inclusion of gender-specific facilities and correctional programmes indicates a move toward tailored institutional design rather than neutral uniformity.

Section 31: Maternal and Reproductive Healthcare

Section 31 introduces a procedural safeguard by requiring medical supervision in cases of pregnancy, along with provisions for appropriate healthcare and nutrition. This reflects a shift from discretionary welfare to institutional obligation, aligning custodial practices with broader public health standards.

Section 32: Children of Women Prisoners

By permitting children to reside with their mothers up to a specified age and ensuring their healthcare, this provision acknowledges the intersection between criminal justice and social welfare. It attempts to mitigate the collateral consequences of incarceration on children, though it also raises questions about the adequacy of institutional arrangements for child development within prison settings.

Section 33: Protection against Sexual Harassment

This section explicitly recognises sexual harassment within prisons as a legal and administrative concern, mandating prompt action on complaints. Its significance lies in formalising accountability mechanisms within custodial institutions, an area traditionally marked by silence and

underreporting. While the Model Prisons and Correctional Services Act marks a clear normative departure from the colonial logic of the Prisons Act, its transformative claims require closer scrutiny. At the level of design, the Act appears to align with the principles of the United Nations Bangkok Rules and the Nelson Mandela Rules, particularly in its emphasis on dignity, care, and gender-sensitive treatment. However, this alignment raises an important question: does the Act represent substantive transformation or a formal incorporation of globally accepted norms?

A critical reading suggests that several provisions, while progressive in articulation, risk remaining procedural rather than structural. For instance, the emphasis on segregation and specialised facilities does not automatically address deeper institutional issues such as overcrowding, staff shortages, and uneven resource distribution across States. Similarly, provisions concerning maternal care and children, though normatively significant, operate within the constraints of prison environments that are not designed to support holistic well-being. Moreover, the Act's reliance on State-level adoption introduces a layer of uncertainty that complicates its implementation. In the absence of binding enforcement mechanisms, the Model Act risks functioning as a recommendatory framework rather than a uniformly realised reform instrument. This raises concerns about regional disparities, where progressive provisions may coexist with inadequate institutional capacity.

There is also a broader conceptual tension embedded within the framework. While the Act gestures toward a rehabilitative and rights-based approach, it remains situated within a carceral logic that continues to prioritise incarceration over meaningful expansion of non-custodial alternatives. In this sense, the alignment with the Bangkok Rules-particularly their emphasis on reducing imprisonment for women-remains partial and uneven.

Taken together, these limitations suggest that India's engagement with international standards operates within a space of selective adaptation rather than complete transformation. This does not diminish the significance of the reforms but points to a more complex reality: one in which normative progress coexists with structural constraints. It is precisely within this tension that India's role as a potential normative actor must be assessed-not merely in terms of legal adoption, but in its capacity to translate principles into sustained institutional change.

Empirical Realities: Women Prisoners in India and the Persistence of Structural Gaps

Recent data from the National Crime Records Bureau's Prison

Statistics India 2023 (as on 31 December 2023) shows a mixed picture: some progress in reducing overcrowding, but deep structural challenges remain for women prisoners. India's total prison population was 530,333 against a capacity of 439,119, giving an overall occupancy rate of 120.8%-better than 131.4% in 2022, but still high, especially in certain states.

Women make up a small share-21,510 prisoners (4.1% of total). Women's sections have lower occupancy (~70%) compared to men's (over 125%). However, this needs careful reading. India has only 35 dedicated women's jails (out of 1,332 total prisons), with a capacity of 7,086. Only 4,293 women are housed there (occupancy 60.6%), meaning just about one-fifth (~20%) of women prisoners are in exclusive facilities. Most remain in separate enclosures within mixed prisons.

This setup raises serious concerns. Lower occupancy in dedicated jails does not mean better conditions—it often hides risks in mixed settings, such as harassment, limited gender-sensitive healthcare (e.g., menstrual/reproductive care), and less focus on women's needs.

A major issue is undertrials: nationally 73.5% of inmates are undertrials, and women show a similar pattern (~74%). Many women in custody are not convicted but stay due to court delays, poor legal access, or economic hardship. These women are often from marginalized groups and primary caregivers, increasing the social and family impact of their detention.

Additionally, 1,318 women prisoners live with 1,492 children. While rules allow children to stay with mothers up to a certain age (usually 6 years), prison life raises worries about child development, healthcare, and emotional well-being.

Overcrowding varies by state: Uttar Pradesh (>150%), Delhi (~200%), and Maharashtra (>150%) face the worst pressure. These differences make uniform reforms harder.

From 2018 to 2023, women's prison capacity grew by about 26.7%, but the number of women inmates rose faster (~32%). This shows expansion hasn't matched demand. Women staff remain limited in many prisons (often ~20% or less), hindering gender-responsive care.

Overall, these figures highlight a clear gap between policy promises (dignity, care, gender focus in the Model Act) and daily realities: overcrowding, infrastructure shortages, and delays persist.

This reveals a key tension: India's normative leadership on gender-responsive justice depends not just on good laws but on fixing ground-level issues. Without closing this gap, its role as a model for the Global South-and its international credibility-remains limited.

Table 1: Key National Prison Statistics – India (as on 31 December 2023)

Indicator	Value	Notes/Source (NCRB PSI 2023)
Total prison population	530,333	4.1% decline from 2022
Total capacity	439,119	
Overall occupancy rate	120.8%	Down from 131.4% in 2022
Women prisoners	21,510	4.1% of total
Occupancy in women's sections	~70%	Lower than men's (~125%)
Dedicated women's jails	35 (out of 1,332 total)	Capacity: 7,086
Women in dedicated jails	4,293	Occupancy: 60.6%
Women in other jails	~17,217	Occupancy: 73.0%
Undertrial prisoners (national)	73.5%	~74% among women
Women prisoners with children	1,318 women + 1,492 children	Highlights family impact

Table 2: Overcrowding in High-Burden States (Selected Examples)

State/UT	Overall Occupancy Rate	Notes on Women Prisoners Impact
Delhi	~200%	Highest nationally; strains gender facilities
Uttar Pradesh	>150%	Highest number of women inmates in many reports; acute pressure
Maharashtra	>150%	Significant overcrowding; mixed jails common
National Average	120.8%	Persistent despite decline

International Projection of Domestic Reforms: Adaptive Diplomacy and South–South Engagement

India's engagement with international criminal justice frameworks increasingly reflects a shift from passive alignment to active projection. This outward orientation is most visible in its collaboration with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, where domestic reform experiences are translated into capacity-building and knowledge-sharing initiatives.

A notable example is the set of training and consultation programmes organised in collaboration with state prison departments, including the 2025 engagement in Guwahati marking Nelson Mandela Day. These initiatives brought together prison officials, legal aid providers, and healthcare professionals, focusing on operationalising principles embedded in the Nelson Mandela Rules. The emphasis on dignity, mental health, and rights-based custodial practices reflects an attempt to move beyond formal compliance toward institutional capacity-building. Earlier initiatives, particularly in states such as Uttar Pradesh, also indicate efforts to standardise practices around healthcare equivalence and custodial welfare through toolkits and training modules.

Beyond multilateral engagement, India's role in South–South cooperation provides another channel for normative projection. Through platforms such as IBSA and development partnership initiatives, India has shared elements of its reform framework, including insights from the Model Prisons and Correctional Services Act, digital governance tools like e-Prisons, and training practices tailored to resource-constrained environments. These exchanges position India as a reference point for countries facing similar socio-economic and institutional challenges, particularly across Asia and Africa.

At the level of global discourse, commemorative moments such as the 15th anniversary of the United Nations Bangkok Rules in 2025 have further opened space for Global South perspectives. India's emphasis on non-custodial measures, alternatives to incarceration, and the preservation of family linkages introduces a distinct normative orientation that contrasts with more securitised and expansionist models of incarceration prevalent in parts of the Global North. In this sense, India's approach reflects an attempt to reframe criminal justice not solely as a question of control, but as one of social balance and rehabilitation.

However, this outward projection warrants critical scrutiny. While India's initiatives demonstrate a growing capacity to shape discourse, the extent to which these engagements translate into sustained normative influence remains uncertain. Much of the current engagement is programmatic—focused on training, consultations, and knowledge exchange—rather than structural norm-setting within international legal frameworks. Moreover, the credibility of such projection is closely tied to domestic performance. Persistent challenges, including overcrowding, high undertrial rates, and uneven implementation across states, complicate India's claim to normative leadership.

There is also an inherent tension within this model of “adaptive diplomacy.” On one hand, India adopts and promotes universal standards; on the other, it seeks to

reinterpret them through indigenous socio-cultural lenses, including concerns around caste, community, and family structures. While this contextualisation strengthens the relevance of global norms, it also raises questions about consistency, especially when domestic realities do not fully align with the principles being projected internationally.

Taken together, India's international engagement in criminal justice reflects an evolving but still incomplete trajectory. It signals a move toward greater participation in norm diffusion and adaptation, yet stops short of fully institutionalised norm leadership. The significance of this role, therefore, lies not in its conclusiveness but in its transitional character—marking a shift in how Global South actors engage with, reinterpret, and potentially reshape the contours of global criminal justice governance.

Challenges, Critiques, and Pathways for Normative Advancement

Despite notable progress in aligning domestic frameworks with international standards, several structural and institutional challenges continue to limit the transformative potential of India's prison reforms. A primary concern lies in the uneven adoption of the Model Prisons and Correctional Services Act across States. Given its advisory nature, implementation remains contingent on regional political will and administrative capacity, resulting in fragmented outcomes rather than uniform reform.

Overcrowding remains another persistent constraint, with certain states reporting occupancy levels exceeding 150 percent. Such pressures directly undermine the feasibility of gender-sensitive provisions, including separate facilities, healthcare access, and rehabilitative programming. Similarly, gaps in implementation are visible in areas such as the availability of crèches, menstrual hygiene management, and reproductive healthcare, where policy intent often outpaces institutional delivery.

Staffing shortages further complicate this landscape. The relatively low proportion of women personnel in prison administration, particularly in high-burden states, raises concerns about the effective enforcement of gender-sensitive safeguards. At a systemic level, the continued dominance of undertrial prisoners—many of whom are women from marginalised socio-economic backgrounds—undermines the shift toward a rehabilitative model by keeping prisons structurally oriented toward containment rather than correction.

At the same time, these challenges also open up important avenues for normative and policy innovation. India is well-positioned to leverage its experience to advocate for a more equity-oriented global framework on prison reforms. One potential direction could involve advancing a Global South–focused initiative on prison equity within multilateral platforms, including the United Nations Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice and the United Nations General Assembly.

Expanding collaboration with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime offers another pathway, particularly in scaling capacity-building programmes and developing

context-sensitive toolkits for prison administration. In parallel, platforms such as BRICS and the G20 could be utilised for data-sharing, policy dialogue, and comparative learning among similarly placed economies.

There is also significant scope for deepening the use of non-custodial measures, especially for women offenders with caregiving responsibilities. Pilot initiatives focusing on probation, community-based corrections, and alternatives to incarceration could serve as practical demonstrations of the principles embedded in the United Nations Bangkok Rules.

At a conceptual level, India's approach reflects an emerging model of normative hybridity—one that attempts to reconcile universal principles of dignity and rights with context-specific realities. This positioning offers an alternative to both rigid universalism, which risks overlooking cultural and social differences, and extreme relativism, which may dilute core rights protections. However, the credibility of this model depends on India's willingness to confront its own institutional limitations.

In this sense, addressing domestic gaps transparently is not a weakness but a strategic necessity. It allows India to ground its international engagement in lived realities, thereby strengthening its claim to normative relevance within an evolving global order.

Conclusion

India's trajectory in the domain of prison reform reflects a gradual but significant transition—from a colonial, custodial framework under the Prisons Act to a more rights-oriented and gender-sensitive approach embodied in the Model Prisons and Correctional Services Act. When viewed alongside its expanding engagement with platforms such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and its participation in South–South cooperation, this trajectory positions India as an increasingly visible actor in the global discourse on criminal justice reform.

By foregrounding the rights and vulnerabilities of women prisoners, India not only aligns itself with international standards such as the United Nations Bangkok Rules and the Nelson Mandela Rules, but also contributes to their contextual reinterpretation. This dual process of adaptation and projection reflects a broader shift in global governance, where emerging powers play a more active role in shaping normative frameworks.

However, the consolidation of this role depends on sustained efforts at the domestic level. Addressing overcrowding, reducing undertrial populations, improving institutional capacity, and ensuring consistent implementation across States remain critical to strengthening both the substance and credibility of reforms.

Ultimately, India's experience illustrates the possibilities and limits of normative engagement in a multipolar world. Its approach suggests that global standards can be both universal in aspiration and contextual in application. If supported by consistent policy action and inclusive diplomacy, this model has the potential to contribute to a more representative and humane architecture of criminal justice—one that reflects not only global consensus but also diverse social realities.

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