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A Sustainable Development Framework for Health-Promoting Prisons in Female Correctional Institutions

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Abstract

This study aimed to develop a sustainable development framework for health-promoting prisons in female correctional institutions in Thailand. It was aligned with the national human capital agenda and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goals 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) and 5 (Gender Equality). A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed, combining documentary analysis and field investigation. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 32 key informants, including administrators and officers from eight female correctional institutions nationwide. The findings indicated that female inmates faced heightened vulnerabilities, particularly in mental health, substance dependence, and reintegration challenges. Sustainable correctional reform therefore required a holistic, gender-responsive approach integrating healthcare, rehabilitation, and psychosocial support. Three key factors emerged: creating healthy physical and social environments, expanding education and vocational training, and fostering psychological resilience. The proposed framework comprised four dimensions—input, process, output, and outcome—and emphasized five components: infrastructure and sanitation, holistic health programs, nutrition, mental health support, and interagency collaboration. Effective coordination across correctional, health, and community sectors was found essential for implementation and sustainability. Ultimately, health-promoting prisons enhanced rehabilitation, dignity, and empowerment for female inmates, reinforcing Thailand's commitment to sustainable development and human rights.

Keywords: sustainable development, health-promoting prison, female correctional institution, female inmates, Thailand

1. Introduction

Thailand's long-term national strategies—including the 20-Year National Strategic Plan (2018–2037), the 12th and 13th National Economic and Social Development Plans, and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—emphasize human capital, social equity, and inclusive well-being. In line with these priorities, the Department of Corrections aims to transform prisons from punitive institutions into centers of rehabilitation and human development (Department of Corrections, 2022).

Globally, over 11.5 million people are incarcerated, with the female prison population rising by 60% since 2000—three times the rate of men. Overcrowding, inadequate healthcare, and limited mental health services remain critical concerns (Global Prison Trends, 2023). Thailand faces similar issues, with more than 270,000 inmates, including about 34,000 women—most imprisoned for drug-related offenses—leading to overcrowding, poor health outcomes, and human rights challenges (Department of Corrections, 2024).

The Corrections Act B.E. 2560 (2017) provides frameworks for rehabilitation, healthcare, and social reintegration, but implementation is hindered by limited resources, outdated infrastructure, and a low staff-to-inmate ratio. To address this, Thailand has adopted the Health-Promoting Prison model, endorsed by the Thai Health Promotion Foundation, integrating health, rehabilitation, and human rights principles (Ismail et al., 2021).

This study therefore proposes a sustainable development framework for health-promoting prisons in female correctional institutions, focusing on five core components—nutrition, environment, ventilation, vocational rehabilitation, and emotional well-being—to enhance quality of life, reduce recidivism, and advance Thailand’s social justice and human development agenda.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the key challenges and limitations in promoting healthy prisons and pre-release preparation for female inmates toward sustainable development.
2. To propose development strategies for healthy prisons and effective pre-release preparation for female inmates in support of sustainable development.

2. Literature Review

Sustainable Development and Health-Promoting Prisons

Sustainable development, derived from the Millennium Development Goals, was formalized in the 2030 Agenda’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—17 goals and 169 targets covering five dimensions: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnership (United Nations, 2015). The SDGs emphasize inclusivity under the principle of “leaving no one behind,” which extends to incarcerated populations, particularly women who face disproportionate vulnerability and limited healthcare access. The WHO’s Health-Promoting Prisons framework reframes correctional facilities from punitive to rehabilitative spaces that foster physical, mental, and social well-being, in line with the Nelson Mandela Rules ensuring healthcare equality for inmates (United Nations, 2015). Integrating SDGs into prison management supports sustainable correctional reform through improved health systems, education, rehabilitation, and reintegration (World Health Organization, 2014).

Treatment of Female Inmates

Correctional treatment should extend beyond punishment toward holistic, rights-based rehabilitation throughout admission, custody, and release, with gender-sensitive approaches that address women’s physical and psychosocial needs (Department of Corrections, 2022). Common models include punishment, rehabilitation, reintegration, and reform, reflecting broader penal theories—retributive, deterrent, rehabilitative, and social protection (Kant, 1999; Brooks, 2003; Khantee, Phutrakul, & Trimek, 2015). A trauma-informed, health-promoting

framework combining healthcare, education, and family connection best supports dignified reentry and SDG alignment (Ismail et al., 2021).

Concept of Health-Promoting Prisons

Health is a dynamic state of physical, mental, social, and spiritual balance (Chokevivat, 2009). A health-promoting prison integrates these dimensions to uphold dignity and rehabilitation, characterized by seven core components: self-care, disease prevention, healthcare access, motivation, supportive relationships, family roles, and social reintegration (Hawanon, & Watthanothai, 2018). Reinforced by the Nelson Mandela Rules and Thailand's correctional reforms, this framework advances Goals 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) and 5 (Gender Equality), linking inmate welfare to sustainable development (WHO, 2014).

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of health-promoting prison development in female correctional institutions (Holloway, 1997). Two methods were adopted: (1) documentary research, involving the collection and analysis of secondary data from academic publications, policy documents, and prior studies on prison health and rehabilitation in Thailand and abroad; and (2) field research, gathering primary data through in-depth interviews with key informants directly engaged in female correctional management.

Population and Key Informants

Purposive sampling was used to select 32 key informants from eight female correctional institutions nationwide. Participants included eight senior administrators and twenty-four correctional officers, each with at least five years of experience in rehabilitation and health-promotion programs.

Research Instruments

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide developed from literature review, related research, and expert consultation to ensure content validity ($IOC \geq 0.80$). The interview covered six areas: (1) sustainable development (SDGs), (2) health-promoting prison components, (3) pre-release preparation, (4) operational processes, (5) institutional management, and (6) sustainable development strategies. Expert validation (five specialists) and triangulation techniques ensured reliability and credibility of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University (COE 2-203/2024) and conducted in accordance with institutional and international ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with confidentiality and anonymity maintained under GDPR.

Data Analysis

Interview data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using content analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The process involved data reduction, organization, and interpretation to identify key themes and strategic guidelines for sustainable development, integrating physical, social, and psychological dimensions.

4. Results

The qualitative analysis explored the lived experiences and perceptions of key informants regarding prison environments and pre-release preparation in the context of health-promoting prison development. The findings revealed multidimensional perspectives among correctional administrators and officers, reflecting inmates' needs, institutional challenges, and strategies consistent with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Table 1: Descriptive Analysis of Key Informants' Personal Characteristics (n = 32)

Personal Factors	Category	Executives (n=8)	Officers (n=24)	Total (n=32)	Percentage
Gender	Female	8	24	32	100.00
	Male	-	-	-	
Age (years)	30–39	-	8	8	25.00
	40–49	2	10	12	37.50
	50 and above	6	6	12	37.50
Educational Level	Bachelor's degree	2	18	20	62.50
	Master's degree	6	6	12	37.50
Monthly Income (THB)	20,001–30,000	-	8	8	25.00
	30,001–40,000	-	10	10	31.25
	40,001–50,000	2	4	6	18.75
	Above 50,000	6	2	8	25.00
Work Experience (years)	5–9	-	8	8	25.00
	10–14	2	10	12	37.50
	15 years and above	6	6	12	37.50

Source: Field data analyzed by the researcher (2025)

A total of 32 key informants from eight female correctional institutions participated in the study—eight administrators and twenty-four officers. All respondents were female, with most aged over 40 and possessing long-term service experience, ensuring credible and contextually grounded insights.

The study found that the development of health-promoting prisons and pre-release preparation in female correctional institutions aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goals 3 and 5.

Despite progress, challenges remained—overcrowding, limited healthcare staff, outdated facilities, and vocational programs misaligned with labor market needs. Overall, sustainable correctional development required multisectoral collaboration, gender-sensitive management, and holistic rehabilitation integrating health, education, vocation, and spirituality to ensure dignity and successful reintegration.

A sustainable framework for health-promoting prisons should encompass four key dimensions: input, process, output, and outcome—spanning inmate assessment, program implementation, rehabilitation outcomes, and long-term reintegration. The proposed sustainable model further emphasizes five interrelated components: (1) infrastructure and sanitation improvement, (2) holistic health and wellness programs, (3) nutritional adequacy, (4) mental health and counseling support, and (5) partnerships with external organizations.

The approach to developing healthy prisons can be summarized in Figure 1.

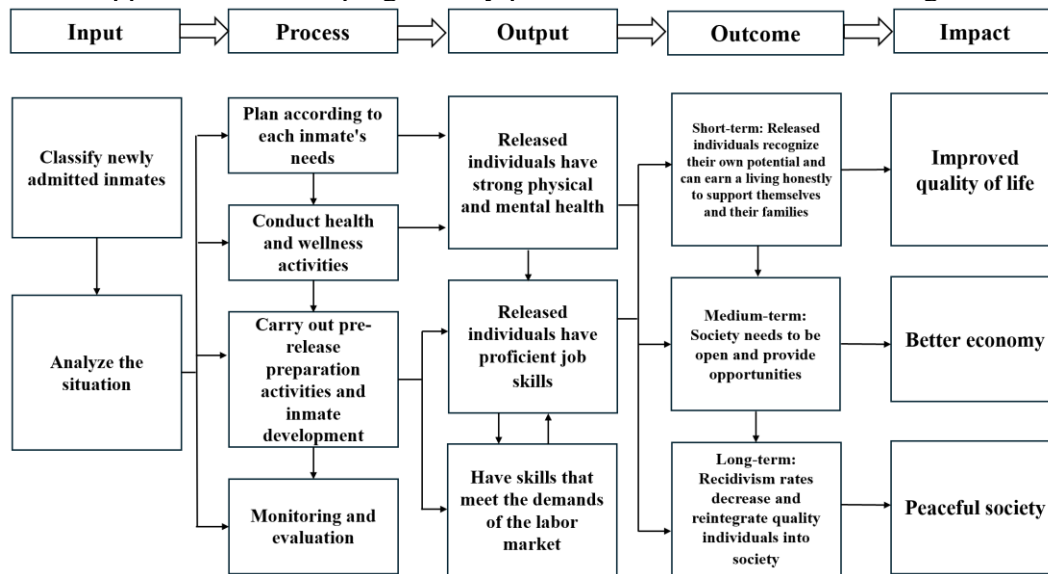


Figure 1. Sustainable Framework for Female Health-Promoting Prisons
Source: Developed by the researcher (2025).

5. Conclusion

The sustainable development of health-promoting prisons for female inmates requires a continuous, integrated, and multi-sectoral approach. Collaboration among correctional agencies, health institutions, and community organizations is vital for effective policy implementation, adequate resource allocation, and personnel support. Ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and lesson learning are essential to ensure efficiency and long-term sustainability.

Female inmates experience unique vulnerabilities—particularly in mental health, substance dependence, and social reintegration—at significantly higher rates than male inmates (Prison Reform, 2019; Woodall, Freeman, & Warwick-Booth, 2021). Therefore, correctional health care must move beyond disease prevention to embrace holistic health promotion, preventive interventions, and comprehensive rehabilitation. Strengthening nursing competencies, expanding public health training, and improving welfare and compensation systems are essential for ensuring equitable and humane care (Suttisan & Srisorn, 2022).

Through interprofessional collaboration and proactive management, these elements can significantly enhance inmates' quality of life and promote successful reintegration. Ultimately, health-promoting prisons advance rehabilitation, dignity, and empowerment for female inmates through gender-responsive and sustainable correctional practices—reinforcing Thailand's commitment to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goals 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) and 5 (Gender Equality).

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