

Climate Crisis Behind the Bars: The Overlooked Impact of Extreme Heat and Flooding in Women's Prisons in Pakistan

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Abstract

Pakistan sits at the meeting point of two disasters that rarely appear in the same sentence. On one side is a climate emergency that has placed the country among the five most climate-vulnerable nations on earth with heatwaves, floods, and droughts arriving faster than any recovery is possible. On the other is a prison system that has been in a state of slow institutional collapse for years overcrowded to 152 per cent of its official capacity, chronically under-resourced, and largely invisible to meaningful reform. This paper asks what happens to the women held inside Pakistan's jails when the temperature reaches 49 degrees Celsius, or when floods destroy the building they are living in.

The paper draws on institutional reports from Human Rights Watch (2020, 2023), Justice Project Pakistan (2024), the National Commission for Human Rights Pakistan (2025), the Research Society of International Law Pakistan (2023), Amnesty International (2025), and climate event data from the Pakistan Meteorological Department and NDMA covering 2022 to 2025. It argues that incarcerated women in Pakistan represent a deeply overlooked population marginalised by gender and poverty, and then stripped of the capacity to protect themselves from environmental harm by the condition of imprisonment itself. The paper documents the specific mechanisms through which extreme heat and flooding injure and kill women in prison, identifies the institutional and legal failures that sustain this situation, and ends with a grounded set of recommendations for researchers, prison administrators, and government actors.

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1. Introduction

In June 2024, temperatures in Sindh Pakistan's most populated southern province reached 49 degrees Celsius. Hospitals in Karachi were overwhelmed. Livestock died in fields. Power infrastructure buckled under demand it had never been built to carry. The official death toll from that heatwave came to at least 568 confirmed fatalities, with nearly 8,000 hospitalisations recorded across the province. Government disaster reports documented the crisis in considerable detail.

Not one of those reports mentioned the women in Karachi Central Prison.

That building, designed for 2,400 inmates, was holding 8,518 at the time more than three and a half times its official capacity. The women's section had no functioning air conditioning. Rolling power cuts during peak summer left electricity off for twelve to eighteen hours daily.

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The prison clinic was staffed far below anything approaching the level needed to serve the population it was responsible for. The women had no ability to seek shade, obtain additional water, or leave. They were entirely dependent on an institutional response that did not come.

This paper takes that specific, concrete situation as its starting point and asks a question that has not been asked in this context before: how does climate change interact with women's incarceration in Pakistan, and what does that interaction look like when examined closely? The answer is not reassuring. What emerges from the available evidence is a pattern of compounding, layered harm falling on a population already pushed to the margins by gender and poverty, and then made significantly more exposed by the condition of imprisonment, which removes almost all capacity for self-protection.

Pakistan is not an incidental setting for this argument – it is the right one. The country produces less than one per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions but consistently ranks among the five nations most exposed to climate change worldwide. The 2022 floods submerged a third of the country's land area, killed 1,760 people, and caused roughly forty billion US dollars in damage. The 2024 Sindh heatwave followed. The 2025 monsoon floods killed over a thousand people and affected 4.2 million more. These are not isolated bad years. They represent successive waves of a crisis that arrives before the last one has been managed, and they hit hardest on those with the least capacity to absorb them.

Pakistan's prison system has been documented extensively as one of the most overcrowded and under-resourced in the world. As of 2024, 102,026 inmates are held in 128 jails running at a national average of 152 per cent of official capacity. Seventy-three per cent are under-trial prisoners – people who have not been convicted of anything, many held solely because they cannot afford bail. Women prisoners are disproportionately in this category, and they enter the system carrying specific vulnerabilities: limited access to legal help, high rates of family abandonment, and healthcare needs that the system consistently fails to meet.

There is a growing body of scholarship on climate vulnerability, and a separate body of work on women's incarceration in the Global South. What does not exist is any serious engagement with what happens when these two phenomena collide in a country like Pakistan. The existing literature on climate and incarceration is almost entirely American in focus. Existing Pakistani prison scholarship rarely mentions weather. This paper tries to fill that gap.

The structure is as follows. Section two positions the paper within existing scholarship on climate justice, carceral studies, and gendered environmental harm. Section three explains the research approach. Section four presents five interconnected findings covering infrastructure failure, heat stress, flooding, gendered vulnerability, and legal shortfalls. Section five offers policy recommendations across three time horizons. Section six concludes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Climate Justice and Who Bears the Weight

The core proposition of climate justice scholarship is that climate change does not injure everyone equally. The burden lands disproportionately on those already pushed to the edge by poverty, by geography, by race, by gender, by political invisibility. This is well established across disciplines from environmental sociology to international law. What is less well theorised is how that differential burden operates when the people at risk are not merely economically or politically marginalised but physically confined and made entirely dependent on institutional care.

Rob Nixon's (2011) concept of slow violence is useful for what this paper is trying to describe. Nixon argues that environmentally driven harm is frequently overlooked because it accumulates quietly, in populations that lack the visibility or political voice to make their suffering legible as harm. The woman in a Pakistani prison who develops heat exhaustion during a third consecutive summer of overcrowded confinement and whose condition is recorded, if at all, as a 'medical complaint' rather than a climate injury is experiencing slow violence in precisely Nixon's sense. The harm is real and structurally produced, but it does not register in disaster statistics or generate institutional response.

Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality framework is equally central here. The argument is not simply that incarcerated women are vulnerable to climate harm. It is that their vulnerability is produced by the convergence of multiple, mutually reinforcing axes of marginalisation that cannot be properly understood in isolation. Being a woman in Pakistan carries specific social and legal consequences. Being poor compounds those consequences. Being incarcerated removes the adaptive capacity that might otherwise partially offset them. Being confined in a climate-frontline country with severely under-resourced institutions places all of this within a system under accelerating external pressure. These factors reinforce each other in ways that analysis of any one of them alone cannot capture.

2.2 Carceral Climate Scholarship and Its Limits

Research connecting climate change and incarceration has been growing for about a decade, but it has significant limitations from the perspective of this paper. The Sabin Center for Climate Change Law at Columbia University produced an early and influential survey of heat conditions in American prisons and jails in 2015. A 2024 study in *Nature Sustainability* found that 1.8 million incarcerated people in the United States are exposed to dangerous heat and humidity for an average of 100 days per year. Jauk-Ajamie (2023) has written specifically on climate change and women's incarceration, arguing that the discussion cannot be separated from reproductive justice given the documented associations between sustained maternal heat exposure and preterm birth, low birth weight, and stillbirth.

This body of work is valuable, but it has two constraints that matter here. First, it is focused almost entirely on the United States – a country with relatively well-documented prison conditions, a functioning legal system through which temperature challenges can be brought in court, and a climate profile that, while serious in parts, does not approach the acute vulnerability of a country like Pakistan. Second, it rarely engages with the structural baseline of prison systems in lower-income settings, where overcrowding, inadequate healthcare, and

failing infrastructure are not exceptional conditions but the starting point from which any climate event must be understood.

Barberet and Jackson (2017) offer a useful corrective in their work on the UN Bangkok Rules and their limited implementation across the Global South. They show that formal standards exist on paper the Bangkok Rules require gender-appropriate healthcare, provision for pregnant and nursing women, and protection for children held with their mothers but that these function as aspirational frameworks rather than operational requirements in contexts where prison systems are under-resourced and under-scrutinised. McCall-Smith (2016) makes a similar argument about the Nelson Mandela Rules, noting that Rule 13's requirement for climate-appropriate prison conditions carries no effective enforcement mechanism.

Ullah and Khan (2025) provide important grounding in their analysis of Pakistan's compounding climate crises, documenting how successive extreme events arrive before earlier ones have been managed. Their work does not address prisons directly, but the structural logic applies with particular force to a confined population that cannot adapt or relocate between disasters.

2.3 The Gap This Paper Addresses

No existing study examines the intersection of climate events and women's incarceration in Pakistan or in any comparable South Asian context. Pakistan's prison reform literature does not disaggregate health data by climate events. Pakistan's official disaster reports do not include prison populations in their vulnerability assessments. The National Disaster Management Authority's emergency protocols make no provision for incarcerated people. This institutional invisibility is not just a gap in the scholarship it reflects and reproduces the political invisibility of this population in the settings where decisions about their welfare are actually made. Closing the gap matters both analytically and in terms of the people it affects.

3. Methodology

This paper uses a qualitative, interdisciplinary research design combining systematic secondary data analysis with intersectional theoretical framing. The choice of methodology is shaped by the research problem. Primary data collection from incarcerated women in Pakistani prisons is not feasible within the scope of this study access restrictions, safety considerations, and the ethical complexity of research with a population under severe institutional control would require an infrastructure and ethical clearance process that extends well beyond what this paper can support. The absence of primary data is, however, treated as a significant finding in itself: no institution in Pakistan currently collects disaggregated climate-health data for incarcerated women, broken down by gender, and this paper documents that absence as a policy failure with measurable consequences.

The analysis proceeds through four phases. The first involved a systematic review of scholarship on climate justice, carceral studies, women's rights in Pakistan, and comparative Global South prison research. Search terms combined 'Pakistan,' 'prison,' 'women,' 'climate,'

'heat,' 'flooding,' 'incarceration,' and 'gender' across Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Web of Science, with priority given to work published between 2010 and 2025.

The second phase involved extraction and verification of climate event data from the Pakistan Meteorological Department, NDMA disaster reports for 2022, 2024, and 2025, peer-reviewed climate science, and reporting from Dawn, The Express Tribune, Al Jazeera, and Mongabay. All statistical claims were cross-checked across at least two independent sources before inclusion.

The third phase involved systematic analysis of prison condition data from Justice Project Pakistan (2024), the National Commission for Human Rights Pakistan (2025), Human Rights Watch reports from 2020 and 2023, the Research Society of International Law Pakistan (2023), the OMCT Global Torture Index (2025), and Amnesty International (2025). Data on overcrowding, healthcare staffing, infrastructure condition, and legal compliance was extracted and organised by province and gender.

The fourth phase involved intersectional synthesis mapping climate exposure data against prison vulnerability data to identify how extreme weather events translate into harm for incarcerated women, and where institutional and legal frameworks fail to prevent that harm. Thematic analysis was applied across all data sources to identify recurring patterns across overcrowding, heat, flooding, gender, and legal gaps.

The paper is positioned explicitly from a human rights standpoint. It proceeds from the premise that conditions of confinement which expose imprisoned people to potentially lethal environmental harm, without adequate institutional provision for their protection, constitute cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment within the meaning of international human rights law regardless of how those conditions are described in official records.

4. Findings and Discussion

The data compiled for this paper points to five interconnected areas of concern. They are presented here in sequence, though in practice they interact and compound each other in ways that any linear account will necessarily flatten. Table 1 below sets out the key statistical indicators that frame the analysis.

Indicator	Figure	Source
National prison overcrowding (2024 average)	152.2% of official capacity	JPP 2024
Total prison population across 128 jails	102,026 inmates	NCHR 2025
Karachi Central Prison occupancy	8,518 held against capacity of 2,400 (355%)	HRW 2023

Under-trial prisoners as share of total	73.41%	JPP 2024
Medical staff serving female prisons nationally	24 staff for over 1,000 women	RSIL 2023
Peak temperature, Sindh heatwave June 2024	49°C (25 June 2024)	Pakistan Met Dept
Confirmed deaths in 2024 Sindh heatwave	568+	NDMA 2024
Hospitalisations in 2024 heatwave	7,905	NDMA 2024
Deaths in 2025 Pakistan floods	1,037+	NDMA 2025
People affected by 2025 monsoon floods	4.2 million	NDMA 2025
Estimated damage from 2022 super-floods	USD 40 billion	World Bank 2022

Table 1. Key statistical indicators — Pakistan prison system and climate events, 2022–2025

4.1 Climate Change and Infrastructure That Was Already Failing

Pakistan's prison infrastructure was in poor condition long before the current sequence of climate disasters began. An audit tabled in the Punjab Assembly found that barracks at District Jail Mansa, flagged for repair in 2018, remained unrepaired five years later. At Open Air Jail Nabha, roofs reported as deteriorated in 2021 were eventually declared irreparable with inmates described as having spent successive summer seasons in structures the prison administration already knew to be unsafe. The provincial prison budget in Punjab was cut by ten per cent in the relevant period, compressing already minimal capacity for maintenance further still.

Against this baseline, the climate events of 2022 to 2025 have caused additional damage that is not being addressed between events. Human Rights Watch's 2023 report explicitly noted that the 2022 floods 'caused further damage to many facilities, especially in Sindh province, and left prison populations even more isolated and vulnerable to waterborne disease.' The 2025 floods then struck the same provinces Sindh, Punjab, KP, and Balochistan before 2022 damage had been resolved. The structural logic matters: climate events do not damage prisons that are in good repair. They damage buildings that are already compromised. Walls already weakened flood more easily. Drainage already inadequate fails faster. Roofs already declared dangerous give way under additional stress. Each disaster leaves the system more exposed to the next.

Table 2 shows the distribution of prison overcrowding by province, cross-referenced with climate risk profiles. The pattern highest overcrowding in highest climate risk zones is not coincidental. It is a product of the same structural conditions that produce both extreme poverty and mass incarceration.

Province	Occupancy Rate	Heat Risk	Flood Risk
Punjab	173.6% of capacity	High — recurring seasonal heatwaves	Moderate-High — monsoon flooding
Sindh	161.4% of capacity	Critical — coastal humidity compounds heat	Critical — Indus River and delta flooding
Balochistan	115.6% of capacity	High — extreme arid heat	High — flash floods and drought oscillation
KP	102.5% of capacity	Moderate in most areas	High — glacial melt and valley flash floods

Table 2. Provincial prison overcrowding rates and climate risk profiles, 2024 data

4.2 Extreme Heat as a Direct Threat to Life

Heat stress occurs when the body's internal temperature regulation system cannot keep pace with external heat. At the temperatures recorded during the 2024 Sindh heatwave ambient readings above 47 degrees Celsius in Karachi on multiple consecutive day the body's primary cooling mechanism, perspiration, becomes inadequate, especially when humidity is high. Heat exhaustion can develop within hours. Without intervention it progresses to heat stroke, which causes organ failure and can kill within minutes of onset. The clinical window for treatment is narrow.

Pakistan's prisons concentrate several factors that make heat illness significantly more likely and more lethal. The buildings are predominantly old concrete structures colonial-era or early post-independence that absorb and retain heat through the day and radiate it back through the night. Interior cell temperatures during a 47-degree ambient event in Karachi may regularly exceed 50 to 55 degrees Celsius in poorly ventilated, densely occupied rooms. Overcrowding at 150 to 350 per cent of designed capacity means that the number of bodies generating metabolic heat in any given space is far beyond what the building's ventilation was ever built to handle.

Water access is formally provided but practically constrained. Clean water supply has been documented as insufficient across the system under normal conditions. During a heatwave, when hydration needs multiply significantly, any increase in water provision depends on institutional will and logistics that are both evidently absent. Load shedding the rolling power cuts experienced during peak summer demand disables whatever fans or limited cooling equipment prisons have for twelve to eighteen hours daily in many parts of Sindh and Punjab during the hottest months.

Certain groups within the prison face elevated risk above this already elevated baseline. Pregnant women are exposed to well-documented heat-related obstetric hazards preterm birth, low birth weight, stillbirth, and neonatal stress are all associated with sustained maternal heat exposure. Women on psychotropic medications face pharmacological risk because many such

drugs inhibit thermoregulatory response. Elderly women and those with cardiovascular or metabolic conditions accumulate physiological stress faster. Nursing mothers require additional hydration the system cannot supply. Children living in the prison with their incarcerated mothers permitted, and sometimes required, under Pakistani law have immature thermoregulatory systems substantially more susceptible to heat injury than adult systems, with far less ability to communicate distress.

What makes this situation particularly hard to document is that heat-related deaths in Pakistani prisons are not being recorded as such. No national data series on heat-related illness or mortality in prison populations, disaggregated by gender, exists. When a woman dies in a Pakistani prison during a heatwave of what would, in a functioning hospital, be diagnosed as heat stroke, the cause of death may be recorded as cardiac arrest or simply as natural causes. The absence of data is not neutral it is the mechanism through which institutional responsibility is evaded and accountability prevented.

4.3 Flooding, Disease, and Being Cut Off

Flooding creates a different but overlapping set of harms. Where heat acts primarily through direct physiological stress, flooding acts through infrastructure destruction, disease transmission, and isolation from any external emergency response. The 2022 super-floods which saw Balochistan receive 500 per cent of its normal July rainfall in a single month and submerged large parts of Sindh for weeks directly damaged prison facilities in ways that had still not been fully addressed when the 2025 monsoon season began.

The immediate physical effects of flooding on prison buildings include structural compromise to walls, roofs, and foundations; destruction of sanitation systems and toilet facilities; contamination of stored water with floodwater, sewage, and biological material; inundation of lower-level cells and sleeping areas; and destruction of medical supplies and equipment in prison clinics. All of this happens in buildings already structurally compromised before the flood, and that lack the repair budgets to address damage before the next event.

The disease consequences of flooding in overcrowded, poor-sanitation environments are well established in public health literature. Cholera, typhoid, hepatitis A, and leptospirosis follow flood events in densely occupied spaces with inadequate sanitation and contaminated water. What distinguishes prisons from other flood-affected settings is that the people inside cannot leave when water recedes and contamination remains. They cannot find alternative clean water sources. They cannot avoid contact with residue. Human Rights Watch documented that before the 2022 floods, Pakistani prison cells were already 'infested with rats, lizards, and other vermin' and that 'scabies and other skin diseases are common.' The Human Rights Ministry had found, as of early 2020, that nearly 2,400 prisoners were living with chronic contagious diseases including hepatitis, HIV, and tuberculosis. Flood exposure does not introduce disease into a healthy population it severely worsens an existing health crisis in a population already carrying a high disease burden.

Pakistan's floods also regularly destroy the roads, communication lines, and transport infrastructure that would enable emergency response to reach affected areas. In 2022, prison facilities in Sindh were left 'even more isolated' following flood damage meaning families

could not reach prisoners, lawyers could not access clients, and emergency medical evacuation became impossible. This isolation carries particular weight in women's facilities. Women prisoners in Pakistan are already more likely than men to have been abandoned by their families upon incarceration, and to lack the informal support networks through which some male prisoners receive supplementary food, medicine, and outside information. Flood isolation removes even the theoretical possibility of that support arriving.

4.4 What Is Different for Women

The sections above describe harms affecting all prisoners in Pakistan's overcrowded, climate-exposed jails. This section examines how those harms are amplified for women, and the gendered dynamics that create additional layers of vulnerability.

A substantial proportion of women in Pakistani prisons are there not because they have been found guilty of anything, but because the bail system is practically inaccessible to them. The 73.41 per cent national under-trial rate conceals a pattern in which women are disproportionately in the under-trial category imprisoned for poverty offences, domestic disputes, or charges under laws that specifically criminalise conduct related to women's sexuality and family relationships. A woman held in a 50-degree cell without functioning healthcare because she could not raise bail money for a non-violent offence has been failed in several ways simultaneously, and the climate harm she experiences is inseparable from those other failures.

Pakistani women prisoners are more likely than men to have experienced family abandonment upon incarceration. The stigma attached to a woman's imprisonment in a social context where family honour is closely tied to female behaviour and reputation means that families frequently cut contact when a female relative enters custody. This matters for climate vulnerability because in Pakistan's prison system, families function as an informal welfare structure. They bring supplementary food, drinking water, medicines, fans, and information that the prison does not provide. Women without family contact are entirely dependent on institutional provision which, as this paper documents throughout, is severely and consistently inadequate. They also have no external channel through which to signal distress during a climate emergency or seek outside intervention.

The healthcare deficit specific to women is severe. Only 24 medical staff serve the entire female prison population nationally, across facilities in four provinces. Gynaecological and obstetric care barely exists in practice. During a heatwave, there is no capacity to assess pregnant women for heat-related obstetric complications, no refrigeration to maintain temperature-sensitive medications, and no reliable ambulance access to civilian hospitals, which are themselves overwhelmed by the same event. During a flood, the limited healthcare that exists under normal conditions is made still more inaccessible by destroyed infrastructure and isolation.

Children living in women's prisons have no legal responsibility for being there and no capacity to protect themselves from the conditions they are held in. Pakistani law permits and in some circumstances requires that infants and young children stay with their incarcerated mothers.

These children with immature thermoregulatory systems, unable to communicate distress, unable to hydrate themselves independently are among the most climate-vulnerable individuals in the country. They represent a category of harm with no parallel in male facilities.

Menstrual hygiene and sanitation become acute concerns during climate emergencies specifically. During a heatwave, high temperatures combined with inadequate clean water and absent sanitary supplies create conditions in which gynaecological infections can develop and progress rapidly. During a flood, when water supply is contaminated and toilet facilities destroyed, the same risk multiplies. These are not marginal concerns they describe predictable, preventable physical harm occurring on a recurring basis.

4.5 The Legal Framework and Where It Breaks Down

The international legal framework governing prison conditions is, on paper, reasonably comprehensive. The UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners the Nelson Mandela Rules, revised in 2015 require that all prison accommodation meets basic health standards with due regard for climatic conditions, that adequate ventilation and lighting are provided, and that prisoners have access to clean water and medical care. Rule 13 addresses temperature regulation directly. The Bangkok Rules, adopted in 2010, add gender-specific requirements: access to gynaecological and reproductive healthcare, provision for pregnant and nursing women, and protection for children held with their mothers.

Pakistan's domestic legal framework provides further protections, at least in principle. Article 9 of the constitution guarantees the right to life. Article 14 prohibits torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. The Islamabad High Court ruled in 2020 that holding prisoners in overcrowded conditions with inadequate sanitation constitutes cruel and inhuman treatment. The Sindh Prisons and Corrections Services Act 2019 and the KP Prisons Amendment Act 2020 represent legislative attempts to align provincial prison administration with international standards.

None of these frameworks have produced conditions in Pakistani women's prisons that approach compliance. The National Jail Reform Policy 2024, which might have begun addressing the structural failures this paper documents, remains unimplemented as of the time of writing. Prison budgets have been cut. The NDMA does not include incarcerated populations in its emergency response protocols. No institution maintains disaggregated climate-health data for women prisoners. Fifty-three probation officers only thirteen of them women are managing caseloads of over 36,000 probationers nationally, which gives some sense of the staffing conditions within which any reform would have to operate.

The gap between formal legal protection and lived reality is itself a significant finding. International standards exist that would, if implemented, provide meaningful protection to incarcerated women during climate events. Domestic constitutional provisions exist that Pakistani courts have already held are violated by current conditions. The shortfall is not primarily a legal one it is a matter of implementation, sustained by institutional indifference, budgetary constraints, and the political invisibility of a population that cannot vote, cannot

easily communicate with the outside world, and whose suffering generates no particular pressure on the institutions responsible for it.

5. Policy Recommendations

The recommendations below are organised across three time horizons. They are grounded in the specific findings of this paper and in the frameworks of the Nelson Mandela Rules, the Bangkok Rules, and Pakistan's existing constitutional obligations. The intention is to be practical rather than aspirational to identify actions that are institutionally feasible rather than simply desirable.

5.1 Immediate Actions

Mandatory heat emergency protocols should be established for all Pakistani prisons, requiring the automatic distribution of additional water above 40 degrees Celsius, suspension of outdoor work and movement above 42 degrees, and the designation of cooled or shaded emergency spaces in every facility. These protocols should be triggered by temperature thresholds, not by discretionary administrative decisions.

Gender-disaggregated health monitoring should be introduced in all women's prison sections, with quarterly reporting on heat-related illness, hospitalisation, and death submitted to the National Commission for Human Rights. The absence of this data enables institutional responsibility to be avoided. Mandating data collection is the minimum first step toward any accountability.

Prison populations should be incorporated into the NDMA's emergency response protocols for both heatwaves and floods, with specific provisions for women, pregnant prisoners, nursing mothers, and children living in facilities. The current exclusion of incarcerated people from national disaster planning has no principled basis and should be corrected immediately.

Bail reform for under-trial women prisoners held on minor, non-violent charges is simultaneously a justice measure and a climate adaptation one. Reducing the number of women held in overcrowded facilities reduces heat exposure. A precedent exists: in 2020, 13,000 prisoners were released in response to COVID-19 risk. A comparable mechanism should be established for declared climate emergencies.

Emergency repair funding should be directed at women's prison sections with documented structural failures starting with facilities in Punjab and Sindh where audit reports have already identified conditions declared irreparable.

5.2 Medium-Term Reforms

All new prison construction and substantive renovation should comply with climate-resilient design standards, including passive cooling, flood-resistant foundations, natural cross-ventilation, rainwater harvesting, and backup power sufficient to maintain basic fans during load shedding.

The National Jail Reform Policy 2024 should be implemented, with a dedicated climate adaptation component covering temperature management, flood preparedness, and medical response capacity during extreme weather events. The current situation a reform policy existing on paper but not in practice is a straightforward administrative failure.

Medical staffing in women's prisons should be increased toward ratios consistent with the Bangkok Rules, with specific training in heat illness recognition, obstetric triage during extreme heat, and waterborne disease management following flood events.

A Pakistan Prison Climate Vulnerability Index should be developed, combining data on facility condition, overcrowding, climate risk, and healthcare capacity by province and gender. Such an index would provide the empirical foundation for prioritising resources and tracking progress.

5.3 Long-Term Systemic Change

Climate justice principles should be embedded explicitly in prison reform legislation at federal and provincial levels, giving courts a statutory basis for intervening in temperature and flood-related conditions that goes beyond the existing constitutional provisions which exist but are not being enforced.

International climate finance particularly under the Loss and Damage frameworks from recent COP negotiations should be made available for prison climate adaptation. Pakistan has a strong political case for Loss and Damage financing given its extreme vulnerability and minimal emissions contribution. Prison infrastructure should be included explicitly in that case.

The UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health should be invited to conduct a joint review of climate conditions in Pakistan's women's prisons. External international scrutiny has historically been one of the more effective levers for domestic reform in comparable contexts.

Academic research tracking health outcomes for incarcerated women across climate events in Pakistan should be funded and institutionalised. The evidentiary basis for effective advocacy does not currently exist because the data is not being collected. Building it requires sustained institutional commitment of a kind that has not been in place.

6. Conclusion

The argument of this paper is not difficult to state, though what it describes is serious. Women are being held in concrete buildings in one of the world's most climate-exposed countries, in a prison system running at 152 per cent of capacity, with 24 medical staff for the entire national female prison population, in a context where temperatures have reached 49 degrees Celsius and successive flood seasons have left infrastructure damage unaddressed. They are being harmed not in dramatic events that generate emergency response, but gradually, in accumulated heat, in contaminated floodwater, in the silence of institutions that do not count them as part of their disaster planning. Their deaths are not recorded as climate deaths. Their

suffering does not appear in Pakistan's official disaster assessments. Their names do not feature in the reports filed with international climate bodies.

Three failures converge in what this paper documents. There is the failure of being female in a social structure that attaches stigma to a woman's imprisonment and withdraws family support when she is most in need of it. There is the failure of being poor in an institutional setting that cannot be navigated without money where bail is practically inaccessible, medical attention sometimes depends on informal payment, and survival depends on family networks that poverty and stigma have already severed. And there is the failure of being on the frontline of a climate emergency that Pakistan did not cause and cannot independently resolve, held in conditions that have stripped away the most basic adaptive capacity any person would otherwise have.

The global climate justice movement has made real progress in establishing that climate change falls hardest on those with the least power to respond. It has been slower to acknowledge that incarcerated people represent one of the most extreme cases of that disproportion people whose adaptive capacity has been formally removed by the state, leaving them entirely dependent on institutions for their survival during climate events. It has been slower still to extend that analysis to the Global South, where climate exposure is most severe and institutional capacity is most constrained.

Pakistan's incarcerated women are not a footnote to this story. The recommendations in Section 5 are grounded in commitments Pakistan has already made, in laws that Pakistani courts have already interpreted in relevant ways, and in administrative steps that require political will more than they require resources. The question is whether that will is present.

The climate crisis is a prison crisis. The prison crisis is a gender crisis. And what happens to the women behind Pakistan's bars in the next heatwave and the one after that is a test of whether climate justice means anything beyond a slogan.

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