

ARTÍCULO DE INVESTIGACIÓN

**Female incarceration and prison life in Chile:
findings from a national study**

Encarcelamiento femenino y vida intrapenitenciaria en Chile: hallazgos de estudio nacional

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ABSTRACT In recent years, there have been more significant concerns around the situation of incarcerated women in Latin America, their links with drug-related crimes, and the limitations of the current prison system to offer meaningful responses to their needs. Nevertheless, empirical data about them in the region are scarce. To fill out part of this gap, we employed data from a national, quantitative study in Chile in 2022 and analyzed the situation of incarcerated women in various aspects. The results show that the most problematic elements of female prison life would be boredom, high drug consumption, psychological suffering, and minimal program access, all of which speak of a prison environment that is not very sensitive or supportive of women's needs. On the other hand, infrastructure conditions, relationship with guards, and resilience behind bars were aspects positively evaluated by incarcerated women, offering space for hope and innovative interventions. The OLS regression model accounted for 50.8% of the variation in meaning making within our sample, with significant, positive predictors being a fair treating by prison guards, a perception that guards take care of them, and having access to job or vocational training. A high drug consumption perceived in the facility, higher access to paramedic and ha



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ving greater amounts of food were indicative of difficulties in meaning making. Altogether, these findings suggest that supportive, fair guards, combined with the generation of job skills, income opportunities, and drug free environments may be supportive of women's meaning making and resilience behind bars.

KEYWORDS Prison; Chile; women; incarceration conditions; national study.

RESUMEN En los últimos años, ha aumentado la preocupación por la situación de las mujeres encarceladas en Latinoamérica, sus vínculos con delitos relacionados con drogas y las limitaciones del sistema penitenciario actual para ofrecer respuestas significativas a sus necesidades. Sin embargo, la información empírica sobre ellas en la región es escasa. Para subsanar parte de esta deficiencia, utilizamos datos de un estudio cuantitativo nacional realizado en Chile en 2022 y analizamos la situación de las mujeres encarceladas en diversos aspectos. Los resultados muestran que los elementos más problemáticos de la vida femenina en prisión serían el aburrimiento, el alto consumo de drogas, el sufrimiento psicológico y el acceso limitado a programas, todo lo cual refleja un entorno penitenciario poco sensible y comprensivo con las necesidades de las mujeres. Por otro lado, las condiciones de la infraestructura, la relación con los guardias y la resiliencia tras las rejas fueron aspectos valorados positivamente por las mujeres encarceladas, ofreciendo un espacio para la esperanza y para intervenciones innovadoras. El modelo de regresión OLS explicó el 50,8 % de la variación en la construcción de significado (resiliencia) en la muestra, con predictores positivos significativos como el trato justo por parte de los guardias, la percepción de que los guardias las cuidan y el acceso a formación laboral o vocacional. Una percepción de alto consumo de drogas al interior de la cárcel, un mayor uso de los paramédicos y el acceso a una mayor cantidad de alimentos obstaculizaban la construcción de significado y la resiliencia. En conjunto, estos hallazgos sugieren que la presencia de guardias apoyadores y justos, junto con la generación de habilidades laborales, oportunidades de ingresos y entornos libres de drogas, podría favorecer la construcción de significados y la resiliencia de las mujeres en prisión.

PALABRAS CLAVE Cárcel; Chile; mujeres; condiciones de encarcelamiento; estudio nacional.

Introduction

Currently, there are more than 700,000 women in prisons around the world, equivalent to about 7% of the incarcerated population, a segment that has increased worldwide between 2000-2017 (Block et al., 2010). In 2003, the United Nations General Assembly addressed the issue of women and children in prison, leading to the approval of the so-called “Bangkok Rules,” which aimed to promote more significant consideration of issues experienced by incarcerated women worldwide as well as challenges for their successful reentry into society.

In the Americas, female incarceration is profoundly tied to other social conditions such as poverty and social exclusion, racism, gendered roles, and drug dealing as a mechanism of survival and as a way to perform gender roles assigned to women, including how they exercise motherhood on the outside (Agoff et al., 2021; Lara, 2016). In a region marked by profound social inequalities and harsh drug policies, female incarceration has rapidly grown in recent years (Giacomelo & Youngers, 2020).

In Chile, women represent about 7.9% of the prison population, which has not been a priority on the public agenda for decades in general (Espinoza et al., 2014). Although there have been initiatives in recent years regarding women deprived of liberty, a gender perspective in the penitentiary context is still in the early stages of development (Pérez, 2018). There is a tendency in criminological studies to focus on committing crimes perpetrated by men, obeying an androcentric vision that privileges the delinquent man (Reyes, 2019, p. 11).

Since in Latin America prison research on incarcerated populations tends to be scarce –particularly when considering systematic, quantitative approaches—(Bergman & Fondevila, 2021), the main aims of this study were to analyze the situation of incarcerated women in Chile, taking advantage of a nationwide assessment conducted in 2022 in various Chilean prisons. The central research questions were knowing, from the perspective of women themselves, their opinions on various indicators on prison life and, at the same time, establish a predictive model for meaning making for them inside prison facilities, looking for sources of resilience and hope, taking into account that previous research has found that hope and meaning making in adverse circumstances could be a good predictor of resilience while imprisoned, especially in women (Enck & McDaniel, 2015; Ibarra, 2022; Richards-Karamarkovich & Umamaheswar, 2024).

Literature Review

Incarcerated women in Latin America

A decade ago, in 2013, the Conference of Ministers of Justice of the Ibero-American Countries (COMJIB) was held, from which the Gender Model Program emerged in the context of deprivation of liberty for Ibero-America to reduce female recidivism. In this region, women deprived of liberty tend to be people who carry various “cumulative disadvantages” since their childhood, including poverty and social exclusion from the family unit. Many of them have also suffered traumatic events such as repeated episodes of domestic violence, intimate partner violence, or sexual abuse (Lara, 2016; Sanhueza et al., 2019) or separation from their family – especially their children – and would consume substances—to somehow alleviate what has been called the ‘pains of female incarceration’ (Cárdenas, 2011; Sanhueza et al., 2019).

Regarding the latter, studies document the negative impact that traumatic events can have on women, which affects their self-esteem and employability. At the same time, prison systems have shown a minimal capacity to address these situations (Sanhueza et al., 2019). Indeed, when women are sent to prison, this context rarely offers conditions worthy of imprisonment or a gender-sensitive perspective. In this sense, women who are deprived of their freedom are sent to facilities with serious infrastructure problems (Bergman & Fondevila, 2021), almost always thought of from androcentric logic and machismo: imprisonment must feel harsh, cold, and violent.

Furthermore, when visitation patterns are taken into account, unlike the opposite sex, women tend to be visited less by their partners as they are assumed to be the ones who exercise emotional roles and nurturing functions within the family family which also includes visiting and supporting family members when imprisoned (Sanhueza et al., 2019).

In terms of their children, Rufs et al. (2023) in a representative sample of incarcerated women in Chile found a relationship between the individual characteristics of their children and the context in which they were left (with the mother’s conviction) and greater reports of problematic behaviors, even after controlling for mother’s prior risk.

In this way, and since they “feel key aspects of prison life such as order, trust, the use of power and legitimacy differently than men,” women experience the pains of imprisonment differently (Crewe et al., 2017). In the words of Carranza (2009), “prison for women is a generically discriminatory and oppressive space that is expressed in the inequality in the treatment they receive, the different meaning that confinement has for them, the consequences for their family and the conception that society attributes to them” (p. 200).

Gender roles and relationship with drugs

In Latin America, close to 70% of women who are deprived of liberty are for non-violent crimes related to drugs in small quantities, many of them being from Afro-descendant or indigenous ethnic minorities (Corporación Humanas, 2016). In Chile, about 41% of the female prisoner population is involved in drug-related crimes, versus 22% in robbery (Gendarmería de Chile, 2025).

At the same time, there has been a sustained growth in the female population imprisoned for this type of crime, which is related to the adoption of a punitive approach to drugs, which ends up disproportionately affecting women (Coletta et al., 2020) and the ability of the structures that profit from this business to find someone to go to prison for them (Piedad, 2016, p. 3). These women are “the last link of the drug trafficking chain” (Ahumada & Pinto, 2017) in a context where female imprisonment seems not to alter or disrupt in any way the drug markets or trafficking of these substances in the region, as who carry high risk and are trapped can be easily replaced, while those running criminal networks rarely end up in prison.

At the societal level, discourses about drugs have a moralistic character, increasing the stigma of women, drug users, as “fallen women” and, therefore, evil women and bad mothers (De Miguel, 2016, p. 531). In this regard, imprisoned women bear the so-called “social punishment” or what has also been called the “double sentence” (Contreras, 2016)—for having violated social expectations regarding their gender and, therefore, “deserving” of social punishment that will extend even beyond prison walls (Contreras, 2016, p. 43).

One of the main inequalities between the male and female population lies in the associated gender roles, understood as “the activities, behaviors and tasks or jobs that each culture assigns to each sex. The roles would vary according to different societies or cultures and throughout history, influenced by factors such as economy, religion or ethnicity” (Martín, 2008, p. 50). Gender roles generate different behavioral expectations for men and women, with motherhood and conjugality being vital spheres that organize and shape women's ways of life from birth (Lagarde, 2005).

In a social context where the responsibility for domestic care lies primarily on women, micro-trafficking becomes a ‘work option’ for many poor women who are also, in many cases, single mothers living in poverty and social exclusion. This arrangement allows them to fulfill the role of caregiver and provider of the home (Bello, 2013). Another factor to highlight here is that in many cases, these women may be coerced by their partners and family members to get involved in this type of crime (Coletta et al., 2020), and a high percentage of women not only traffic drugs but also consume them (Lara, 2016).

At the same time, as De Miguel (2016) states, when these poor women are caught committing crimes, they are socially accused not only for the crime itself but also for having transgressed gender norms. Indeed, by committing a crime, the incarcerated women have contravened their role as submissive, dependent, and docile wives and mothers by getting involved in crime (Cárdenas, 2011; Piedad, 2016).

Bringing these conceptions to the penitentiary environment reveals inequality depending on who commits the crime. At the same time, for men, it means reinforcing values associated with their virility, granting them prestige, courage, daring, and manliness; breaking the norm for women contradicts the values and stereotypes on which he has built his identity (Reyes, 2019, p. 12). Thus, it turns out that “the penal system is blind to their differential situation and applies a punitive power that punishes not a crime, but their condition as poor women and their situation of economic and social lack of protection” (Bello, 2013, p. 54). Thus, the consequences of incarceration for women, their families, and communities can be devastating compared to male incarceration (Coletta et al., 2020; Valenzuela et al., 2012).

Hope, resilience, and mental health behind bars

Previous research has linked finding hope and meaning making in adverse circumstances could be a good predictor of resilience while imprisoned and rehabilitation outcomes, especially in the case of women (Enck & McDaniel, 2015; Ibarra, 2022; Richards-Karamarkovich & Umamaheswar, 2024). For example, Hidayati and colleagues (2023) conducted a scoping review on the various “hopes” that incarcerated women had behind bars, given the positive impacts that hope can bring to incarcerated individuals in correctional settings. They were able to identify previous studies addressing ‘realistic hops for the future,’ ‘hope to be a better person,’ ‘hope to reunite with family,’ ‘hopes to not engage in crimes again,’ ‘hope for revenge,’ and a group of ‘women with no hope.’ They also found that source of hope may come from social support while in prison, as well as religious or program activities.

In the same vein, Wai-Ming et al. (2021) discovered that, similar to what had been found with non-forensic populations, incarcerated women with higher levels of hope experience lower psychological symptoms, and that positive attentional bias was associated with higher hope and lower psychological distress. They also found in statistical models that both positive and negative attentional biases appeared to be partial mediators of the relationship between hope and psychological distress.

Van Ginneken (2016) in a qualitative, narrative-base study with a small sample of incarcerated women in England, found that making sense of and generating a meaning of being imprisoned could be a source of growth, personal development, and distance from crime if they were able to manage the posttraumatic crisis triggered by incarceration, leading towards a positive reconstruction of their identity.

In addition, it is important to note that the existing literature lacks sufficient analysis on the cultural differences in prisons compared to other countries. Bucerius and Sandberg (2022) found that in “Latin America and other parts of the world, prisons are even more underfunded and overcrowded.” Country-specific analysis is crucial, then, to addressing each specific need of incarcerated populations, which may find different approaches to resolving key issues that work better than others in a different country.

In general, however, early victimization, leading to mental health and substance misuse issues, continues to come into play. Unfortunately, these factors are often “un-addressed or exacerbated while incarcerated (Lorenz & Hayes, 2020). While reducing recidivism may be a publicly identified value, the lack of action toward the underlying causes is likely increasing recidivism instead. Instead, facilities must emphasize rehabilitation and trauma-informed care using a strengths-based approach. This is more likely to directly address victimization, addiction, and mental illness (Bucerius & Sandberg, 2022).

The existing literature also attempts to identify other exacerbating causes of such high mental illness and substance misuse. Two-thirds of justice-involved women are mothers to minor children. While parenting has been attributed to a motivating factor for avoiding criminal activity, and thus separation from children, motherhood may actually be a significant factor for avoiding mental health and addiction treatment, due to fear of separation once their problems are identified professionally (Bucerius & Sandberg, 2022). This is indeed the case, unfortunately, as Gueta (2020) states that the “severe social stigma surrounding mothering and drug use” has led to higher rates of positive at risk assessments for the children of lower socioeconomic status. The current research highly supports the use of co-housing, nursery, and in-person visitation programs for mothers who are already incarcerated to give them a sense of purpose for avoiding recidivism.

Characteristics of incarcerated women in Chile

Currently, Chile has more than 63,000 individuals behind bars today, housed in one of the 90 facilities throughout the country (Gendarmería, 2025), with an incarceration rate of approximately 315 persons per 100,000 inhabitants (World Prison Brief, 2025). Historically, prisons in Chile have struggled with a deteriorated infrastructure, increased overcrowding, and fundamental habitability deficits. (Espinoza et al., 2014; INDH, 2018). This situation interacts with increased violence among fellow inmates (Sanhueza et al., 2020), institutional mistreatment from guards towards incarcerated individuals (INDH, 2018), corruption on the part of staff (Sanhueza & Pérez, 2019), poor access to reintegration programs (Espinoza et al., 2014), a highly disadvantaged prison population (Fundación Paz Ciudadana, 2016), and, more recently, with organized crime as a disrupting actor of prison life (Alveal, 2020).

As in the rest of the world, prison populations are made up mostly of men. According to recent statistics from the Chilean prison service [*Gendarmería de Chile*, in Spanish] (2024), the institution currently serves just over 4,300 women deprived of liberty in Chile (7.9% of the total prison population), of which approximately 53% are awaiting trial, versus a 47% sentenced. Most of them (81%) are held in public facilities (versus 19% in private prisons), and the average age of women deprived of liberty in Chile reaches 35.5 years. Other sources of information (Sanhueza et al., 2019; Centro UC de Políticas Públicas, 2017) add that most of them have children (almost 90%), with an average of 4-5 children per woman, and a predominant marital status as 'single' (75%).

Regarding the life trajectories of these women and their approach to the world of crime, various studies have shown that most of them come from low socioeconomic strata, facing a lack of essential goods and services, with families of several siblings, and with difficulties in exercising. Parental control. A context of family instability is evident, often marked by abuse or abandonment by their parents, which forced, for example, several of them to assume caregiving roles for younger siblings from an early age (Larroulet et al., 2019; Sanhueza et al., 2019).

In terms of the nationality of origin, the number of foreigners imprisoned was 575 people, equivalent to nearly 20% of the total number of women deprived of liberty in the country's prisons, the majority of whom are Bolivian (377), Colombian (90) and Peruvian (44). However, in statistically low numbers, the presence of imprisoned women coming from China (1), Italy (2), and Haiti (1) is striking, given the significant language barriers they may be facing. A vast majority of all of them is behind bars as a result of drug offenses.

When ethnicity is considered, indigenous women numbered 300 people in total (169 Quechua in the North of the country; 80 Mapuche in the South and Center-South; 44 Aimara, also in the North; 3 Atacameñas; 3 Diaguitas; and 1 Colla). Thus, the indigenous component was present in a 10.35% of the incarcerated women. Regarding its regional distribution, the three regions of the Norte Grande concentrate around 27% of incarcerated women.

Thus, the constant increase that the female incarcerated population has experienced in recent years in Chile and Latin America has made it clear that the penitentiary system has been developed to meet the characteristics of the male population (Cárdenas, 2011, p.6) and, therefore, has not been able to adequately "adapt" in a way that is ideal for the particularities of women. Indeed, although the Chilean penitentiary system has been perating a gender model program from about a decade ago, its main foci have been on improving prison infrastructure, implemtng programs aimed at carrying out the maternal role (Reyes, 2019, p. 11), and specialized work for incarcerated women –mainly in labor, education, and health.

On the other hand, no many programs or evaluation efforts have been conducted on studying prison life for incarcerated women, or undertaking measures to improve their mental health, severely deteriorated by their previous-to-prison, traumatic personal trajectories. Thus, despite some degree of progress, prison facilities in Chile still operate under a male-centered logic in the way programs are built and public policies are formulated (Pérez, 2018; Sanhueza et al., 2019). It is important to analyze the specific conditions of these women in order to develop evidence-based intervention strategies that may support their social reintegration and prevent recidivism (Espinoza, 2016), considering the specificities of this particular population (Ariza & Iturrialde, 2017).

Thus, considering that incarcerated women have various, different needs that are probably not currently met by the prison system in Chile, but also in view of that systematic accounts –specially for incarcerated women—are relatively few in the region, we thought that a quantitative approach on prison conditions was a missing piece of information that we could contribute to fill, taking advantage of a national study in 20 facilities that was conducted between 2022-2023.

Methodology

The main research goal in this particular study was to characterize prison conditions for a sample of incarcerated women throughout the country, in order to identify main problems in terms of infrastructure, relationship with peers, treating by guards and staff, program access, among others. We did this in order to identify an evidence-based agenda for prison reform, especially for the case of imprisoned women, whose voices are barely heard within the public policy arena in Chile. At the same time, it was relevant to identify predictors of meaning making for incarcerated women, since finding hope and meaning in adverse circumstances could be a good predictor of resilience and rehabilitation (Enck & McDaniel, 2015; Ibarra, 2022; Richards-Karamkovich & Umamaheswar, 2024).

This specific study took place in the context of a nationwide assessment of prison life (for both male and female offenders) carried out between June-November 2022 in 20 prison facilities throughout the country, considering the largest facility in each of the 16 regions, plus additional four large prisons in the Metropolitan Region of Santiago. The sample of facilities was done considering that these facilities house the country's largest, most complex prison populations for each region and were chosen in consultation with the Chilean prison system. Incarcerated women were only housed in 13 of the facilities that were selected. Inside them, a sample of 70 women was randomly selected.

With the assistance of the prison service's central statistical unit in Santiago, individuals were preselected within each of the 20 selected facilities, using a random sampling strategy with a confidence level of 95%. Initially-selected participants were convoked to classrooms, chapels, libraries, or any other available space in different prison facilities that may offer some degree of comfort and privacy to get introduced to our study, clarify potential questions (if any) they may have, explain risks and discomforts, and obtain their informed consent. Approximately an 81% of initially-contacted incarcerated individuals finally agreed to participate and fill out the two questionnaires (MQPL and GHQ-12).

Once the consent was expressed, every selected individual filled out the MQPL and the GHQ-12 questionnaires in a group session that lasted between 30-40 minutes. No monetary incentives were given for participating. The Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Chile approved the study in 2021. During the implementation of the survey we took special care in that no uniformed personnel (i.e. prison guards) were present during the survey administration, so incarcerated women felt free to express their opinions without evaluative apprehension or fear of possible retaliation.

In order to do so, we employed a quantitative framework to ask incarcerated women in Chile by applying an adapted version of the Measuring Quality of Prison Life [MQPL] questionnaire, a survey that has been previously employed in various prison contexts around the world, including both developed and developing countries (Liebling et al., 2011; Liebling, 2004; Sanhueza et al., 2015). In terms of its reliability for the Chilean context, we employed Cronbach's Alpha to evaluate its different sub-dimensions, finding values between 0.74 and 0.92 as a measure of internal consistency, which suggest good levels of reliability.

This instrument asked women's perceptions on a variety of aspects of prison life, including confinement conditions, their relationship with both guards and fellow imprisoned women, program access, the overall functioning and regime of the facility, the treatment of visitors, and the use of drugs, among others. For most questions, the instrument employed a Likert-type approach, where women had to respond to how often a particular situation happened to them, from 1 to 5, with 1: "never" to 5: all the time. In addition, basic demographics and criminological questions were included. The adapted MQPL had a total of 54 questions, plus additional 12 that were added from the Goldberg's General Health Questionnaire [GHQ-12].

For predicting 'meaning making', we employed as the dependent variable the item "I have been able to find meaning in my life in this prison", which was included in the adapted version of the MQPL for Chile. Six independent variables were selected, considering various domains that had been found to be relevant in prison life, namely: getting a fair treating by prison guards, a perception that guards take care of

them, having access to job or vocational training, the perceived amount of drug consumption in the facility, access to paramedic healthcare, and receiving an appropriate amount of food.

Yet the prison administration in each facilities was instrumental and collaborative in most cases, none of them knew in advance the list of selected individuals in our study, in order to minimize possibilities for potential making-up of the samples. A group of two or three research team members were always present in the setting where the survey administration took place. The questionnaires were filled out by participants in a self-administered way, with the assistance of someone from the research team if needed (especially those with limited vision or were analphabet), using a paper-and-pencil format (since, for security reasons, no external electronic devices were allowed inside any facility), and with no guards present in the same room during the survey administration.

Data were analyzed using Stata 13.0 software and main techniques applied consisted of descriptive and summary statistics (mean, standard deviation, range), t-test to compare certain scores between two groups of interest (i.e. those women housed in public versus private prisons), and OLS regression for the modeling of the dependent variable “I have been able to find meaning in my life in this prison”.

Main Results

This study about incarcerated women took place within the context of a more extensive, national study on prison life in Chilean facilities. Following a stratified, random sampling strategy, we obtained informed consent from a total sample of 1,159 incarcerated individuals, including 70 women, which represented about a 6% of the total sample of the national study, a percentage that was slightly smaller to national figures (8%) on incarceration rates for women.

In terms of demographics and basic information, our sample results show that most surveyed women were Chilean nationals (94%), housed in public facilities (77%), with an average age of 37.1 years [ranging from 19 to 68]; a 47% of them had been incarcerated before; about 23% of them had had at least one stay in children protective services; and that a 53% had middle school completed or less years of formal education.

We also asked them to answer questions regarding program access, interpersonal relationships with peers, relationships with guards and staff members, prison functioning, prison regime, and their general, self-rated mental health, whose detailed results are presented next, in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics MQPL and GHQ-12 Instruments for incarcerated women (national results).

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
<i>Sociodemographic and basic criminological</i>				
Age	37.1 years	12.12	19	68
National Chilean	94.3%	0.233	0	1
Formal education (middle school or less)	52.9%	--	0	1
Formal education (some high school or high school completed)	44.1%	--	0	1
Stay in children protective services and/or juvenile justice	22.8%	0.42	0	1
Previous incarceration (sentenced)	47.0%	0.50	0	1
Time served in facility: more than 2 years	58.5%	--	6 months	2+ years
Serving sentence until 2025 or later	63.7%	--	2022	2025+
<i>Basic infrastructure and services</i>				
I have adequate temperatura in the cell	2.20	1.36	1: never	5: always
Here I get a good amount of food	3.72	1.40	1	5
In this prison I get a decent bathroom (toilet) here	3.37	1.61	1	5
I have adequate ventilation in my cell	3.50	1.52	1	5
I receive food in good condition	3.65	1.39	1	5
I receive natural light in my cell or module	3.94	1.53	1	5
I sleep in a clean place	4.71	0.66	1	5
<i>Program Access</i>				
Access to paid work	3.11	1.64	1	5
Access to psychological care	2.61	1.50	1	5
Here I have got job training / vocational training	2.94	1.61	1	5
In this prison I have received addiction treatment	3.33	1.80	1	5
Here I have been able to speak to a social worker	3.15	1.50	1	5
Here I can get access to the paramedic if I need it	3.17	1.26	1	5
In this prison I have got access to the penal school	4.39	1.30	1	5

<i>Interpersonal relationships with fellow inmates (alpha = 0.74)</i>				
Here the weakest inmates are abused	3.48	1.45	1	5
Here I fear for my physical integrity	2.33	1.50	1	5
I get along with other inmates here	3.88	1.00	1	5
I feel insecure or threatened	2.08	1.32	1	5
Other inmates treat me with respect	3.85	1.15	1	5
I feel safe against attacks from others	3.05	1.56	1	5
I have friends here who help me	3.60	1.42	1	5
<i>Interpersonal relationships with guards and staff (alpha=0.92)</i>				
I am treated with respect by the staff	3.94	1.17	1	5
I have received humiliating treating here	2.47	1.45	1	5
I am treated like a human being here	3.55	1.40	1	5
I get along well with the cell block's guards	4.12	1.11	1	5
I feel like the guards trust me	3.52	1.46	1	5
In this prison the guards are honest	3.22	1.30	1	5
I get help from staff if I need it	3.54	1.20	1	5
In this prison the guards worry about me	3.30	1.35	1	5
<i>Prison regime (alpha = 0.80)</i>				
I know the steps to make a claim	3.28	1.63	1	5
In this prison there are clear rules	2.98	1.55	1	5
I feel discriminated against here	1.94	1.39	1	5
Here they respond quickly to requests	3.02	1.35	1	5
Guards respond quickly in emergencies	3.20	1.45	1	5
Each guard sets their own rules	3.61	1.31	1	5
In this prison my rights are respected	3.02	1.29		
<i>Prison functioning (alpha = 0.83)</i>				
My life in this prison is boring	3.81	1.12	1: never	5: always
I have suffered a lot in this prison	3.71	1.40	1	5
Here I have thought about suicide	2.23	1.58	1	5
There is a lot of drug consumption here	3.58	1.56	1	5
The atmosphere in this prison is tense	3.73	1.15	1	5
In this prison everything runs on money	3.44	1.66	1	5
The guards are fair in their treating towards us here	3.36	1.20	1	5
Visitors are treated well here	3.39	1.27	1	5

<i>General Health Questionnaire GHQ-12 Annex</i>				
My worries have caused me to lose sleep	1.72	1.14	0	3
I have constantly felt overwhelmed	1.73	1.14	0	3
I can't overcome difficulties	1.00	1.15	0	3
I have felt sad or depressed	1.88	1.03	0	3
I have lost confidence in myself	0.76	1.17	0	3
I am a person who is good for nothing	0.62	1.15	0	3
I have been able to concentrate on what I do	1.79	1.05	0	3
I have felt I play a useful role in life, even when I am here	1.77	1.19	0	3
I have felt capable of making decisions when necessary	1.98	1.00	0	3
I have been able to enjoy some of my daily activities here	1.78	1.03	0	3
I have been able to adequately deal with my problems	2.02	0.97	0	3
Considering all my circumstances, I feel reasonably calm	1.70	1.09	0	3
Total sample = 70				

Infrastructure conditions and basic services

Regarding infrastructure conditions, our questionnaire measured women's perceptions of various items. All the items in this section were measured from 1-5, where lower values implied a more negative situation. In this dimension, the lowest score was "in this prison, I have an adequate temperature in my cell," with 2.2. On the other hand, they reported the highest scores for "I have a bathroom in good condition" (3.37) and for "I have good ventilation in my cell" (3.50).

Program Access

When asked about program access, we obtained mixed results. On the one hand, the lowest scores were assigned to access to talk to a psychologist (2.6), and to participate in vocational training (2.90). On the other hand, access to a paid job (3.11), the possibility to talk to a social worker (3.15), and access to paramedic attention (3.17) ranked better, in the upper part of the scale.

Relationship with fellow incarcerated women

Generally, this dimension ranked with medium-high scores (favorable situation) for almost all items. For example, “Other inmates treat me with respect” scored 3.85, and “I have friends here who help me” punctuated 3.60. However, when women were asked about whether there was abuse by fellow female inmates over the weakest ones, the average response was 3.48, suggesting that abusive situations against some women would be relatively common experiences for others to observe in their facilities.

Relationship with prison staff and guards

Most scores ranked positively regarding the relationship between incarcerated women and their custodians and staff, showing medium-high values. Some of the items were “I get along well with the module guards” (4.12), “I am treated like a human being here” (3.55), and “I am treated with respect by the staff” (3.94). One indicator showed “I have received humiliating treating here”, which scored 2.47, meaning that a portion of the incarcerated women may have experienced some degrading situation by guards and/or staff.

Prison regime

Regarding the prison regime, some of the items scored with somehow concerning results. For example, “in this facility, there are clear rules” scored 2.98, which, combined with the item “each guard puts her own rules here” (3.61), may suggest that there could be variations in the rules and expectations depending on the guards’ shift or other factors that may make the prison environment less predictable. In addition, the item “in this prison I get a decent treatment and my rights are respected” scored 3.02, meaning that, despite that, in most cases, they could have felt respected, and a significant portion of other women could feel the opposite.

Functioning of the prison

This was the dimension where most problematic situations for women came to light through the surveys. Indeed, our results showed various issues regarding boredom (“my life here is boring,” scoring 3.80), suffering within the prison (“I have suffered here,” punctuating 3.70), drug consumption (“there is much drug consumption in this prison” = 3.58), tense environment (“the environment here is tense” = 3.73), corruption within the prison (“things here move on with money” = 3.44), and prison functioning in general (“this prison works well” = 2.85).

Self-reported mental health

We employed the GHQ-12 Questionnaire to assess women's general mental health and to detect cases that may need urgent support. This instrument was split into two halves, with the first six questions (1-6) referring to problematic or negative situations related to mental health, with scores varying from 0-3 (lower scores meaning a better report). Questions 7-12 referred to positive situations, and the scores also varied from 0-3 but, in this case, higher scores referred to a better situation. In this dimension, scores were not entirely negative, yet there was some degree of problems reported for "I feel I still play a meaningful role in life" (1.77), "Considering all my circumstances, I feel reasonably calm" (1.70), or "I have been able to enjoy some of my daily activities here in prison" (1.78).

Multivariate results

We conducted a multiple, linear regression to predict which variables were significantly associated with a sense of hope for incarcerated women. We operationalized this using the item "I have been able to find meaning in my life in this prison", and included various independent variables as possible predictors. We checked for signs of multicollinearity using the correlation matrix, and the variance inflation factor (VIF) statistic, finding no signs of this problem. The results of the multivariate OLS model for meaning making for the incarcerated women in ur sample are presented in Table 2.

Table 2.

Predictive model for meaning making inside prison for female inmates.

Source	SS	df	MS			n = 65
Model	64.83	6	10.80		F (6, 58)	12.02
Residual	52.15	58	0.899		Prob >F	0.0000
Total	116.98	64	1.827		Adj r ²	0.5081
<i>Dependent variable [p53] "I have been able to find meaning in my life in this prison"</i>	Coefficient	Standard error	t	p	[95% Confidence Interval]	
p52 The guards are fair in their treating towards us here	.418	.154	2.71	0.009	.109	.728
p47 There is a lot of drug consumption here	-.243	.081	-2.98	0.004	-.406	-.079
p36 In this prison the guards worry about me	.321	.145	2.22	0.031	.031	.611
p19 Here I can get access to the paramedic if I need it	-.259	.110	-2.35	0.022	-.480	-.038
p16 Here I have got job training / vocational training	.188	.081	2.31	0.025	.024	.352
p8 In this prison I get a good amount of food	-.244	.094	-2.59	0.012	-.432	-.055
Constant	3.388	.614	5.51	0.000	2.158	4.618

Our main results show that the model was significant, and able to account for half (50.8%) of the variation in the dependent variable "I have been able to find meaning in my life in this prison". In addition, positive predictors being a fair treating by prison guards, a perception that the guards care for them, and having access to job or vocational training were found to be positively associated predictors of meaning making. On the other hand, A high drug consumption perceived in the facility, higher access to paramedic and having greater amounts of food were negatively associated to the dependent variable. No statistical differences for incarcerated women in their meaning making were found between those housed in public versus private facilities ($t = -0.53$. $p < 0.000$).

Conclusion and Discussion

In Chile, incarcerated women still constitute "a vulnerable minority that has traditionally been made invisible both for academic research and for the formulation of public policies" (Pérez, 2018, p. 64). To try to fill part of this gap in knowledge and public policy, in this article I aimed to generate initial evidence on prison conditions and prison life for incarcerated women in Chile, based on their own accounts. In addition, considering the importance that meaning making and resilience may have for

incarcerated women in terms of rehabilitation, I employed a multivariate OLS regression model to account for meaning making and discover some predictors associated to it in the sample.

In this regard, various problems affecting the quality of life of incarcerated women were found which, at the same time, could be interacting with previous, accumulated issues that had been affecting the female population on the outside as well. For example, we identified the (mis)functioning of many facilities, scarce program access for women, and, to a lesser degree, the deterioration of infrastructure conditions. In addition, in terms of self-reported mental health, feelings of sadness, difficulties to sleep due to worries, and feelings of overwhelming were reported as some of the most pressing mental health issues affecting women in the sample. Besides, a broken or damaged relationship with their children on the outside, the abuse of drugs as a coping mechanism to deal with the pains of imprisonment, and the high level of cumulative trauma and mental health deterioration are still some of the most pressing issues affecting incarcerated women in the country.

Aligned with expectations, women in the sample reported a lack of meaningful activities combined with cumulative, traumatic experiences. Altogether, these situations might be creating or reinforcing a very negative environment in prison for incarcerated women, reflected, for example, in reports of frequent drug consumption inside facilities, feelings of deep suffering and/or boredom, or a deteriorated mental health. At the same time, the results of the multivariate OLS model showed that meaning making in prisons was positively linked to guards being fair to incarcerated women, a perception of guards caring for them, and to the existence of job skill or vocational programs inside prison facilities; conversely, a perception of higher drug consumption within the facility was negatively associated with meaning making.

Contrary to expectations, the results showed that, in general, incarcerated women seemed not to necessarily have a bad relationship with both staff and fellow inmates and that perceptions about infrastructure were not as bad as initially hypothesized. These findings are promising and suggest a more positive view of prison life than anticipated. Besides, an increased access to paramedic services and receiving greater amounts of food in the OLS model showed more difficulties in meaning making for women in the sample, perhaps linked to (or as a reflection of) other problems such as anxiety or physical health difficulties.

Nevertheless, it is important to consider some limitations of this study. Some of them include its limited sample size ($n=70$), combined with the fact that, for most regions and prisons, the number of incarcerated women were very low. In addition, foreign women –despite existent in Chilean prisons– were not specially analyzed in this paper, as our account was more quantitative in nature; besides, from a statistical point of view, given the small sample size, it was difficult to detect potential differ-

ences between nationals and foreign-born women. Finally, we can mention that, by averaging responses, certain problems affecting a smaller number of women in certain facilities may be overlooked. We sincerely hope that further research—including some qualitative accounts—may go deeper into some of these gaps. In this regard, this work is just an initial attempt to account for prison conditions for the female population, and more systematic accounts may be needed to address their intervention needs (Sanhueza et al., 2019).

Prison reform policies for women need to address the societal challenges that widen the disparities of women in the criminal justice system in the first place. In this regard, it is critical to understand that “gender inequalities are pre-existing social and cultural conditions when entering a prison” (Cárdenas, 2011, p. 5) and that a series of cumulative disadvantages affecting and interacting in female incarceration (Sanhueza et al., 2019, p. 140) including social exclusion, severe trauma due to sexual abuse and domestic violence (physical and psychological), family instability and problematic drug use. When we consider other converging conditions, such as belonging to an ethnic group, migrant status, sexual orientation, gender identity, etc. (Burgess-Proctor, 2006 in Pérez, 2018, p. 71), their situation becomes even more dramatic.

Now, as suggested by Agoff and her colleagues, “in a society based on familism and marianismo identities that suffers from a lack of welfare institutions, motherhood provided a way for socially and economically excluded women to escape destructive family environments and gain autonomy” (p. 15), emphasizing that, for most women, the central pieces of their lives would not be crime or delinquency but, rather, their children. In the Chilean context, given that almost a 90% of incarcerated women are mothers, one dimension that might improve prison life for incarcerated women could be found, precisely, outside prisons. In other words, if the relationship with the outside has been critical for women before incarceration, perhaps improving their communication and relationship with the outside world (especially with their children) could be a key factor to improve prison life through reducing anxiety, violence, depression, and drug use.

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