

Specific Needs of Remand Prisoners in Sri Lanka: A Qualitative Thematic Analysis

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Abstract—Remand prisoners are a legally unique population within correctional systems, as they are detained pending trial or sentencing and are presumed innocent under the law. Nevertheless, in many developing justice systems, remand detainees often experience conditions equal to or worse than those of convicted prisoners. This study examines the physical, psychological, and social needs of remand prisoners in Sri Lanka. A qualitative research design was used to conduct five focus group discussions at the Magazine and Colombo Remand Prisons. Male remand prisoners were selected using the stratified and purposive sampling techniques. The data were analysed using thematic analysis. The results show serious deficiencies in physical well-being (healthcare, nutrition, sanitation and overcrowding), psychological stability (stress, anxiety and lack of mental health support), and social connectivity (family separation, limited communication and delayed legal proceedings). The study underscores the urgent need for systemic reform to provide humane detention conditions and adhere to international human rights standards. Recommendations for policy improvement include the reinforcement of healthcare services, the implementation of structured mental health services, improved access to legal aid, and increased efficiency in case management.

Index Terms—Prison Conditions, Qualitative Research, Remand Prisoners, Specific Needs

I. INTRODUCTION

Remand imprisonment is a key but highly contentious element of the administration of criminal justice. It is the detention of individuals awaiting trial, the completion of an investigation, or final sentencing, sanctioned by the state. Remand prisoners are not yet proven to be guilty of any crime and are entitled to constitutional protection under the presumption of innocence, unlike convicted prisoners. In an ideal system of justice, this legal status should afford them conditions that respect

their unconvicted status. But in the practical world of corrections, this theoretical distinction often gets badly blurred. Institutional constraints, systemic delays and acute resource shortages often result in convicted and unconvicted populations being pressed into the same punitive spaces, with remandees subjected to conditions that are indistinguishable from, and sometimes worse than, those experienced by convicted criminals.

The remand prison system in Sri Lanka is riddled with a systemic crisis that has existed for years, which greatly impacts the human dignity of its occupants. Chronic overcrowding, caused by long judicial delays, a reluctance to grant bail, and an overreliance on custodial remand for minor offences, is central to these challenges^[1,2]. The influx of detainees often exceeds the capacity of the old colonial facilities and strains them well beyond their limits. Sanitation is often so bad, there are not enough beds, and there is a serious shortage of basic facilities. Moreover, these resource-starved facilities cannot provide adequate access to healthcare and clean drinking water and timely legal aid. The environment created not only puts the physical and mental health of the detainees at risk but also reveals serious shortcomings in the country's compliance with human rights standards and in the overall efficiency of prison management. This operational reality sharply diverges from the international human rights standards meant to safeguard incarcerated populations. The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, also known as the Nelson Mandela Rules, clearly state that all prisoners, particularly those not yet convicted, should be treated with inherent dignity. The guidelines mandate that states provide decent living conditions, full healthcare coverage, and free access to legal assistance to guarantee a fair trial. Despite Sri Lanka being a signatory to many international human rights instruments, much remains to be done in terms of implementation. The friction between these international mandates and local custodial realities underlines an urgent need to scrutinise how the state manages its unconvicted population. Despite their protected legal status and the theoretical presumption of innocence, remand prisoners in Sri Lanka are often subjected to systemic neglect within the correctional framework. In terms of correctional resource allocation, the security and management of convicted populations are often prioritised, and the immediate, specific needs of remand detainees are routinely marginalised. This neglect is expressed as a complex matrix of unmet physical, psychological and social needs that build up daily during a detainee's period of incarceration. The systemic failures of the Sri Lankan prison system, including riots, overcrowding and structural decay, occasionally find their way into the public and political consciousness, but there is a lack of empirical, qualitative research that investigates these failures holistically through the prism of the lived experiences of prisoners. The existing literature has overwhelmingly relied on quantitative institutional measures, such as official capacities and static demographic data, which fundamentally fail to capture the nuanced human dimension of pre-trial detention. This study directly addresses this empirical void by using a qualitative thematic analysis to capture the authentic voices and lived realities of remand prisoners within selected detention facilities, illuminating how institutional gaps manifest into daily human suffering.

This study aims to address four specific objectives in an effort to fill the gaps identified in the literature and institutional frameworks. Firstly, it aims to identify and record the immediate

physical needs of remand prisoners, with a focus on nutrition, sanitation, space and access to healthcare. Secondly, the study investigates and discusses the psychological and emotional difficulties faced by detainees resulting from sudden separation, the uncertainty of detention and institutional stress. Third, it looks at the social and legal support needs of remand prisoners and assesses their ability to maintain contact with their families and secure effective legal representation. Finally, the study aims to develop practical evidence-based policy recommendations to improve remand conditions, to bring local practices in line with international human rights standards and to optimise prison management in Sri Lanka.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Remand Prisoners and Legal Status

The position of remand prisoners in contemporary criminal justice systems is unique and precarious. They are legally unconvicted persons who are confined solely for procedural reasons, such as reduced flight risk or to prevent the tampering of evidence, at the crossroads of state authority and individual liberty. Their legal status remains that of presumed innocence and therefore requires a custodial setting that is entirely removed from any notion of punishment. Pre-trial detention should be regarded as an exceptional last resort and used under strict judicial control, according to scholars including Coyle (2009). The prolonged periods of remand without trial seriously violate the basic principles of human rights and in effect turn administrative detention into a form of pre-emptive punishment (Coyle, 2009)^[3,4].

Prison conditions

A major factor in shaping the everyday life of an inmate continues to be the material reality of custodial environments. There is a substantial body of global scholarship that shows the physical conditions of confinement – overcrowding, dilapidated infrastructure, compromised sanitation, poor nutrition and severely restricted healthcare – are structurally endemic to developing correctional systems. As Liebling (2004) notes, the physical and moral climate of a prison influence the well-being of inmates and their perception of the legitimacy of the institution. Incarceration of prisoners will be understood as illegitimate and degrading if basic human needs are not satisfied. Empirical studies on the prison complex in Sri Lanka reveal that the facilities are functioning at double or triple the intended capacities. The hyper-congestion creates a catastrophic strain on colonial-era ventilation and plumbing systems, exposing remandees to increased infectious disease vectors, sleep deprivation and basic resource scarcity, actively stripping them of their bodily dignity (Liebling, 2004)^[5].

Effect of Detention on Mental Health

The stress of incarceration is magnified for pre-trial detainees because of the suddenness and disruption of their arrest and the enormous uncertainty surrounding their future. Convicted prisoners have a sentence structure and a clear release date to adjust to. Remand prisoners, on the

other hand, live in a state of chronic liminality. According to Zamble and Porporino (1988), the greatest stress experienced by inmates comes from extreme behavioral unpredictability and a total lack of control over legal outcomes. This ambient uncertainty serves as a trigger for severe psychological distress, precipitating clinical anxiety, major depressive episodes, and acute situational stress. The sensory deprivation of the cell environment and the constant fear of institutional violence only exacerbate the psychological trauma. Detainees are compelled to develop maladaptive coping mechanisms or to suffer extreme mental regression while they wait for their day in court (Zamble & Porporino, 1988).^[6]

Family separation and social isolation

Strong social ties are widely recognized as a vital pillar of psychological resilience and successful post-release reintegration. But the structural organization of remand centres completely disrupts these essential support networks. Remand prisoners also regularly face limited visitation hours, invasive monitoring of family visits and prohibitive communication barriers all of which shatter external family structures. The emotional pain of this forced separation is double-edged, destabilising the family unit financially and socially whilst simultaneously removing the prisoner's main emotional buffer. For Sri Lankan remandees, this isolation is exacerbated by geographical mismatches with detainees being held in prisons far from their home districts and economic hardships faced by their families, rendering the cost of regular prison visits completely unaffordable. There is a large and growing body of international research on macro-level prison conditions and inmate sociology but there is a significant analytical gap regarding localised, micro-level studies in South Asia, particularly in Sri Lanka. Most modern domestic research uses quantitative, institutional reporting that is heavily dependent on macro-metrics such as spatial capacity, administrative costs and recidivism rates. Such top-down approaches invariably distort the lived realities, emotional worlds and expressed needs of prisoners. In addition, empirical focus tends to be heavily weighted towards convicted populations, leaving the distinct, dual-status realities of remand prisoners underexplored. The present study directly addresses these crucial empirical and methodological gaps. The qualitative thematic analysis foregrounds the lived, experiential accounts of remand detainees in Sri Lanka and transforms passive institutional subjects into active co-producers of criminological and policy discourse.

III. METHODOLOGY

Design of Research

The present study used a qualitative research design to explore the in-depth perceptions and lived experiences of remand prisoners. Qualitative inquiry was deemed most appropriate because the research questions were interpretive and experiential in nature and sought to understand subjective realities, not to measure quantifiable outcomes. Data were collected from two urban detention facilities in Sri Lanka: Magazine Remand Prison and Colombo Remand Prison. These institutions were purposively selected because they had high populations of people on remand and were

representative of custodial environments in urban areas and were therefore particularly appropriate for producing findings that were rich in context and relevant. A combination of stratified and purposive sampling techniques was used to ensure that there was both breadth and depth of representation. Stratified sampling was employed to ensure sufficient representation across categories within the remand population and purposive sampling was used to identify and select participants best placed to provide rich, relevant and informative data. For this purpose, five focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted with 8-10 male remand prisoners in each group making a total of 40-50 participants. Data were collected mainly through focus group discussions. This approach was chosen because it allows a dynamic and interactive dialogue between participants to share, reflect and compare their experiences collectively. The group format was especially useful in bringing out common stories and contrasting perspectives in the remand prisoner population, and in encouraging participants to build on points made by others.

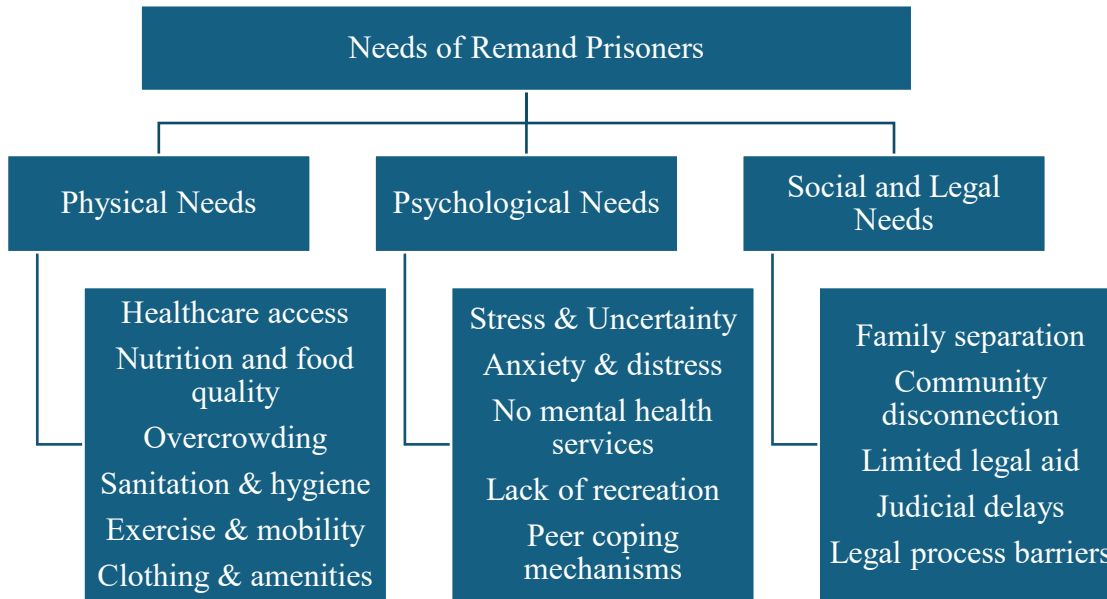
A thematic analysis, following a systematic six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke, was used to analyse data generated from the focus group discussions. The analytical process progressed in a sequential manner through:

1. Familiarisation with the data, during which transcripts were read and re-read to achieve immersion;
2. Generation of initial codes, whereby relevant features of the data were systematically identified and labelled;
3. Searching for themes, through which codes were collated into potential broader patterns of meaning;
4. Reviewing themes, to ensure coherence and distinctiveness across the thematic structure;
5. Defining and naming themes, to capture the essence of each theme in relation to the research questions;
6. Producing the final report, in which the findings were synthesised into a coherent and analytical narrative.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis of focus group discussions in Magazine Remand Prison and Colombo Remand Prison revealed three overarching themes of physical needs, psychological needs and social and legal needs. The themes identified capture the multidimensional deprivations experienced by remand prisoners and are presented below with supporting narrative from participant discussions. The following figure gives an overview of the interrelationship between the three themes, before taking a step back to look at the wider prisoner experience.

Figure 01: Needs of Remand Prisoners



Source: (Field Study, 2025)

Theme 1: Remand prisoners’ physical needs

A first theme from the data was about physical conditions of confinement and whether basic bodily needs were being met. Participants at both study sites painted a consistent picture of material deprivation that cut across a number of interrelated dimensions.

Availability of health services

All participants uniformly complained about severe limitations in access to timely and adequate medical care. Common ailments such as skin problems, respiratory infections and pain-related complaints were often left untreated for long periods of time, with participants reporting long waiting times before being seen by facility medical staff. Not only did they suffer physically from the lack of prompt care, they also took it as a sign that their wellbeing was of low institutional priority.

Nutrition and food quality

In all the focus groups, food quality and quantity were constantly complained about. Participants described the food as nutritionally inadequate, monotonous in variety and insufficient in portion size. There were concerns about the repetitive nature of the daily menus and the absence of balanced dietary provision and more general questions about whether nutritional standards compatible with humane detention were being met.

Overcrowding and living conditions

Overcrowding was one of the most vehemently expressed concerns. The severe shortage of physical space is said to disrupt sleep, affect personal hygiene and cause constant interpersonal tension. Beyond its direct physical effect, overcrowding was said to create conditions favorable to

the rapid spread of communicable diseases, further aggravating the already present health deficiencies.

Hygiene and Sanitation

Another common concern was the lack of adequate sanitation infrastructure. Participants identified limited access to working toilet facilities and limited opportunities for bathing, which resulted in both physical discomfort and tangible health risks. The lack of opportunity to carry out basic personal hygiene was experienced as profoundly dehumanising, further undermining participants' sense of dignity.

Exercise and movement

At some times, opportunities for physical activity were described as minimal or nonexistent. Thus, it was perceived that enforced sedentariness had a compounding effect, in terms of physical deterioration and its knock-on effects on psychological health and mood regulation.

Basic amenities and clothing

Participants also reported not having enough clothes and other basic personal hygiene items, including soap, toothbrushes, and sanitary materials. Although these shortfalls are sometimes seen as minor in institutional terms, they were experienced as significant indignities that undermined participants' ability to maintain any semblance of normalcy. Collectively, the findings of this theme point to a situation where basic survival needs are not consistently met across the institutions studied, which is directly at odds with international standards for humane detention, including the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules).

Theme 2: The psychological needs of prisoners on remand

The second main theme is the psychological aspects of detention on remand. All focus groups expressed a deep and complex psychological burden, created by both the circumstances of confinement and by the specific uncertainties of remand status.

Stress and Uncertainty

The most dominant psychological issue that emerged was uncertainty about legal outcomes, which caused stress. Remand detainees, in contrast to sentenced prisoners, have a liminal status – they are confined but unconvicted. The protracted and unpredictable nature of judicial proceedings was reported to be a source of constant and debilitating anxiety. Participants described an overwhelming inability to plan, rest or achieve any psychological balance when there was no known timeline for their cases.

Emotional distress and anxiety

More generally, participants described strong feelings of anxiety, helplessness and emotional instability as a direct result of the confinement experience. As participants described, the loss of autonomy, the forced separation from family, and the monotony and deprivation of the prison environment combined to create a continuing state of emotional dysregulation.

Absence of mental health services

Participants talked about high levels of psychological distress, but formal mental health support was described as either non-existent or so limited as to be virtually inaccessible. There was no report of regular operation of structured counselling, therapy or mental health screening programmes. In the absence of institutional provision, the participants lacked legitimate channels to process or manage their psychological difficulties.

Insufficient recreational activities

Limited access to recreational activities – books, games, structured programmes or any organised use of time – was identified as an important factor in psychological deterioration. The boredom and mental stagnation that ensued were not simply trivial inconveniences but were actively contributing to emotional distress and cognitive decline over the course of detention.

Coping Strategies

Where formal psychological support was lacking, participants described informal peer networks as a key coping strategy. Participants' accounts also indicated that emotional relief was also achieved to some extent through sharing experiences, mutual reassurance and informal conversation with other detainees, although these were described as partial and improvised substitutes for structured support. The psychological burden described in this theme is substantial. This suggests that the current implementation of remand detention in the institutions studied results in significant mental health consequences that are not being addressed, and which are further exacerbated by an institutional environment that provides little structure to mitigate them.

Theme 3: Legal and social needs of remand prisoners

The third theme examines the social and legal dimensions of the remand experience – how detention works to disrupt participants' social identities, relationships and ability to meaningfully engage with the legal processes that have led to their detention.

Separation of families

Participants consistently and passionately highlighted the distress of limited contact with family members. Restrictions on visit frequency, logistical and financial barriers to family members wanting to attend, and limited access to telephone contact were associated with profound and persistent grief. The severing of family ties was particularly damaging for many participants because family ties were a key source of psychological resilience.

Disconnection of the community

Participants also reported feeling more distant from community and social life outside the immediate family unit. Long periods of detention were experienced as breaking social bonds, lowering social standing and resulting in loss of social identity that participants felt would be hard to regain. All groups expressed this phenomenon with notable intensity. Incarceration is a form of social death as well as physical death.

The right to legal assistance and representation

A large number of participants said they had very limited access to legal advice and adequate legal representation. Many said they could not afford to pay for a lawyer in private practice and relied on duty solicitor services, which were under-resourced or not available very often. The lack of legal representation was material and resulted in many participants appearing before the courts with an incomplete understanding of their case. This materially impaired their ability to engage with their own legal situation.

Court proceedings are delayed

Extended detention caused by postponed court appearances was found to be one of the most common and harmful aspects of the remand experience. Participants reported waiting months, sometimes longer, for their cases to progress, with frequent adjournments and deferrals occurring without sufficient explanation. Such delays extended all other elements of deprivation described in this section, and increased the psychological distress noted under theme 2.

Contact with the legal system

Finally, participants reported significant difficulties in understanding the legal processes to which they were subjected. Complex procedural language, and a lack of communication from legal representatives and accessible information about the progress of the case left participants feeling disempowered and confused about their own circumstances. This communicative gap between the legal system and its detainees is, in itself, a meaningful form of procedural injustice. In general, findings under this theme point to the fact that the lack of social support and systemic failures in the provision of legal aid and procedural transparency aggravate the significant deprivations of remand detention, resulting in emotional distress and substantive injustice.

The three themes collectively describe a picture of remand detention that is characterised by intersecting and compounding deprivations. Unmet physical needs endanger health and bodily integrity; unmet psychological needs create lasting mental anguish without institutional remedy; and weak social and legal support systems isolate detainees from their communities and from the processes that determine their fate. Collectively, these findings demonstrate a significant discrepancy between the lived realities of remand imprisonment in the institutions studied and the standards of humane detention required by domestic commitments and international human rights regimes.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The present study was conducted to investigate the multidimensional needs of the remand prisoners at Magazine Remand Prison and Colombo Remand Prison in Sri Lanka, particularly the physical, psychological, social and legal dimensions of detention. The findings, drawn from thematic analysis of five focus group discussions, paint a grimly worrying picture of multiple and intersecting deprivations which, when combined, fall short of the standards required by domestic law and international human rights standards, including the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules). This was the case across all three themes. The institutional environment not only fails to provide for the basic needs of remand prisoners but actively exacerbates their vulnerability. Physical conditions characterized by overcrowding, poor nutrition, inadequate sanitation and limited access to healthcare undermine detainees' bodily health and dignity. These material inadequacies are exacerbated by the near total lack of formal psychological support, leaving prisoners to manage extreme anxiety, emotional distress and cognitive decline on their own, with improvised peer-based coping mechanisms. Limited family contact, systemic delays in judicial proceedings and insufficient access to legal representation contribute to the social and legal isolation of detainees, cutting them off from the relationships and processes that are most vital to their wellbeing and to the exercise of their rights. What is especially important about these findings is the particular status of those affected. Remand prisoners are unconvicted persons. Their detention is, in principle, a temporary measure pending judicial determination. That people would be forced to endure conditions of this severity, without the rehabilitative programming available to sentenced prisoners, and without the certainty that defines sentenced incarceration, raises serious questions of proportionality, procedural justice, and institutional accountability. This study points to the significant gap between lived realities and normative standards to which Sri Lanka is committed nationally and internationally and this gap needs urgent attention.

Based on the empirical findings of this study the following evidence-based recommendations are made to the policy makers, prison administrators, legal institutions and civil society stakeholders responsible for the remand system in Sri Lanka.

The prison authorities should carry out a systematic audit of the physical infrastructure in remand facilities and take immediate remedial action to address the most critical deficiencies highlighted in this study. In particular, nutritional standards must be reviewed and reformed so that meals meet established dietary requirements in both variety and caloric adequacy. Sanitation facilities should be improved and maintained so that detainees can practice basic personal hygiene without hindrance. Healthcare provision should be re-organised to ensure that all detainees have timely access to medical attention, including routine screening on admission and a clear referral pathway for more serious conditions. However, longer-term structural solutions are required to address overcrowding, including a review of policies on the management of the remand population and greater use of non-custodial alternatives for lower-risk detainees, in line with Rule 58 of the Nelson Mandela Rules.

The most striking gap highlighted by this research is the absence of any structured mental health provision in the institutions under study. Prison authorities should establish formal mental health services in remand facilities, in consultation with the Ministry of Health and relevant professional bodies. Such provisions should include routine psychological screening on reception, access to qualified counselling professionals and structured therapeutic programmes to address the specific stressors of remand detention, including uncertainty about legal outcomes and enforced family separation. Meanwhile, there is a need to formalise and train peer support frameworks as they are currently the primary coping mechanism while structured services are being developed. Recreational and educational programmes should also be introduced as part of a broader mental health strategy, minimising the enforced idleness that participants indicated as a major contributor to psychological deterioration.

Given the importance of family connection to participants' psychological resilience, remand facilities should review and liberalise policies regarding family visitation to remove unnecessary logistical barriers and increase the frequency and duration of permissible contact. Telephone and, where possible, video facilities should be available at a reasonable cost to allow for regular contact with family members who are unable to visit in person. In view of the social identity erosion and community disconnection documented under Theme 3, consideration should be given to broader social reintegration programming for those on extended remand. Access to effective legal representation is a basic right, and its systematic deficiency in the current remand system is a serious form of procedural injustice. The Legal Aid Commission of Sri Lanka needs to be well resourced to ensure consistent and quality legal representation for remand prisoners who cannot afford private counsel. The availability of duty solicitor services should be reviewed in terms of both how often they are available and the level of engagement they can offer individual detainees. Similarly, concerted efforts should be made to improve legal literacy among remand prisoners through accessible written materials, paralegal support and structured legal information sessions explaining case proceedings in plain language. Participants identified long delays in court proceedings as one of the most damaging features of the remand experience and suggested that systemic judicial reform is necessary to address this. The relevant authorities should review case management practices in courts serving remand populations to reduce unnecessary adjournments, improve the efficiency of scheduling and introduce maximum timeframes for the progression of remand cases. Where legislative reform is necessary to underpin these objectives, this should be undertaken as a matter of urgency. The greater use of bail and non-custodial options should also be examined in suitable cases to reduce the remand population and consequently, to lessen the human cost and institutional pressures recorded in this study. The findings of this study, in broad terms, highlight the need for a comprehensive national policy review of the conditions of remand detention in Sri Lanka, explicitly benchmarked against the Nelson Mandela Rules and other relevant international instruments. Such a review should include independent monitoring, interaction with civil society organisations involved in prison reform and a clear accountability framework for execution. Periodic, independent inspection of remand facilities with publicly

reported findings will be a necessary mechanism of oversight and will drive sustained improvement over time.

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