



REFORMING PRISON INDUSTRIES IN SRI LANKA: REHABILITATION, RECIDIVISM AND ECONOMIC PRODUCTIVITY

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Abstract

On 12th of January 2026, the Prisons Department of Sri Lanka reported that inmates from 10 prisons across the country had voluntarily donated their meals to provide relief to those affected by Cyclone 'Ditwah'. While this humanitarian gesture was widely praised, it raised an important question on how far those prisons absorb from the national economy and how much they reinvest through productive prison industries and rehabilitation mechanisms.

The main objective of this study is to identify a suitable prison industry model capable of improving economic productivity in the context of prison overcrowding and high recidivism rates, through prison labour, strengthening rehabilitation, reducing recidivism and improving the productive reintegration of prisoners into society while also maintaining human rights obligations.

To achieve this objective, this study adopts a qualitative doctrinal methodology by analyzing constitutional provisions, statutes, prison regulations, policy reports, and international human rights standards. Further, this study incorporates a qualitative comparative methodology to analyze the international prison industry models, especially the rehabilitative framework of the Tihar Jail system in India, in comparison with the current Sri Lankan prison structure. In addition, through quantitative secondary research, it examines the prison statistics, fiscal performance reports and governmental expenditure reports to assess the economic burden and operational realities of the Sri Lankan prison system.

The findings of the study reveal that Sri Lanka's prison system currently operates under severe overcrowding, high recidivism rates, poor rehabilitation programmes, and outdated vocational training systems. This is coupled with inadequate prisoner remuneration and weak implementation of work-release schemes. In addition, this study identifies that prison labour remains economically underutilised, despite the presence of a significant working-age inmate population. The comparative analysis demonstrates that rehabilitation-oriented prison industries, when properly regulated, funded, and linked to market-oriented vocational training, can contribute to reducing recidivism rates, increasing post-release employment opportunities, and reducing operational costs borne by the State.

Accordingly, the study recommends a Reform-oriented prison industry model based on properly regulated public-private partnerships, certification-based vocational training, fair remuneration

mechanisms, structured revenue-sharing systems, post-release employment pathways and stronger accountability frameworks.

However, the study emphasises that economic productivity must not come at the expense of prisoner-welfare and dignity. It thereby proposes a balanced prison industry framework that combines economic sustainability with rehabilitation and humanitarian protection.

Keywords: prison industries, prison labour, prison reform, rehabilitation, skill development and vocational training

Introduction

On the 12th of January 2026, the Prisons Department of Sri Lanka announced that inmates from 10 prisons across the country, including Welikada, Bogambara, and Matara, had voluntarily donated their meals to provide relief to those affected by Cyclone ‘Ditwah’.¹

This humanitarian contribution was widely hailed, but accompanied by a startling economic awareness, as the Prison Department statistics revealed that the estimated value of food items donated by said prisons totalled a baffling Rs. 3,064,481.² This significant amount revealed a substantial absorption of taxpayer funds for the maintenance of basic sustenance in the prison.

This led to a curious question... how far do these prisons absorb from the economy, and how much do they reinvest? It is common knowledge that incarceration has a massive cost to the state, both as direct and opportunity costs. When a person is incarcerated, the state takes responsibility for their maintenance, which isn’t limited simply to sustenance, as accommodation, hygiene, routine medical care, and such expenses play a major role in ensuring humane detention centres, while other expenses, such as security systems and surveillance, continue to add to the state’s fiscal burden.

Crisis of Prison Systems in Sri Lanka

Prison Overcrowding and Strain of Resources

Further, the increasing prison population in Sri Lanka adds another layer to these expenses. It imposes a significant financial burden on governments while also affecting social cohesion within communities. This increasing prison population leads to prison overcrowding, where the number of inmates exceeds the designated capacity of a prison facility.³

¹ ADA derana, ‘Prison inmates across Sri Lanka donate meals to support Cyclone ‘Ditwah’ victims’ *ADA derana* (Colombo, 12 January 2026) <<https://www.adaderana.lk/news.php?nid=117055>> accessed 5 March 2026.

² Ibid.

³ The Committee for Protecting Rights of Prisoners, *Status of Prisoners in Sri Lanka: 2025 Annual Report* (CPRP, 2025) <<https://www.cprp.lk/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Book-final-print-final-1.pdf>> accessed 01 April 2026.

According to the Prison Statistics of Sri Lanka 2025 from the Department of Prisons Sri Lanka, in 2024, prison overcrowding in Sri Lanka reached a critically high level. The total authorised prison capacity was 10,395, while the actual daily average prison population was 29,789. This indicates that prisons were holding nearly three times their intended capacity, resulting in an overall overcrowding rate of 286.6%. Therefore, this figure highlights a severe strain on prison infrastructure and highlights the escalating issue of overcrowding within the Sri Lankan prison system (Refer Figure 01).⁴

This situation is further confirmed by the Committee for Protecting Rights of Prisoners in its Status of Prisoners in Sri Lanka: 2025 Annual Report, which notes that in 2025, prisons are operating at approximately 280% -300% of their designed capacity nationwide. As a result, cells originally designed to accommodate 3 to 4 inmates are now required to hold up to 12 prisoners,⁵ highlighting the extreme overcrowding and its impact on the State's fiscal costs.

⁴ Department of Prisons, *Prison Statistics of Sri Lanka 2025* (Department of Prisons, 2025) <<http://prisons.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Prison-Statistics-of-Sri-Lanka-2025.pdf>> accessed 01 April 2026.

⁵ The Committee for Protecting Rights of Prisoners, *Status of Prisoners in Sri Lanka: 2025 Annual Report* (CPRP, 2025) <<https://www.cprp.lk/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Book-final-print-final-1.pdf>> accessed 01 April 2026.

ACCOMMODATION & OVERCROWDING, 2015 - 2024									
Year	Authorized Accommodation			Daily Average Population			Percentage Overcrowding		
	Convicted	Unconvicted	Total	Convicted	Unconvicted	Total	Convicted	Unconvicted	Total
2015	6,728	5,034	11,762	9,766	8,230	17,996	45.2	63.5	153.0
2016	6,728	5,034	11,762	8,853	8,625	17,478	31.6	71.3	148.6
2017	6,728	5,034	11,762	9,036	10,242	19,278	34.3	103.4	163.9
2018	6,728	5,034	11,762	8,967	11,417	20,384	33.3	126.8	173.3
2019	6,728	5,034	11,762	10,056	14,390	24,446	49.4	185.9	207.8
2020			13,241	8,735	17,256	25,991			196.3
2021			11,291	6,669	11,668	18,337			162.4
2022			10,395	8,416	13,563	21,979			211.4
2023			10,395	9,728	17,834	27,562			265.1
2024			10,395	10,310	19,479	29,789			286.6

Source: Department of Prisons

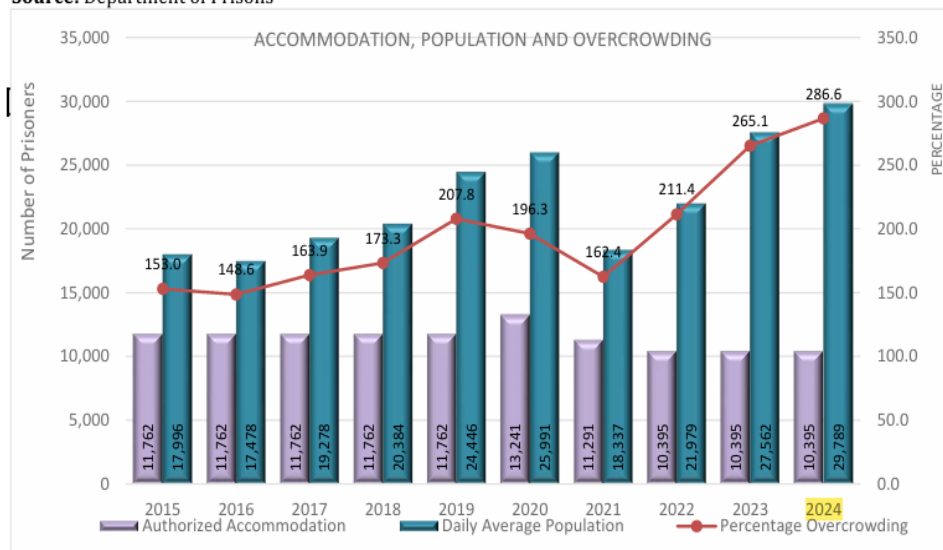


Figure 01

Operational Costs of Increased Healthcare Burden

The strain imposed by this prison overcrowding is also reflected in the growing demand for prison healthcare services. According to the Prison Statistics of Sri Lanka, in 2024 alone, outdoor medical treatments increased to 408,082 cases, while indoor treatments recorded 23,863 cases during the same period (Refer Figure 02).⁶ This rise further shows how overcrowding not only escalates

⁶ Department of Prisons, *Prison Statistics of Sri Lanka 2025* (Department of Prisons, 2025) <<http://prisons.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Prison-Statistics-of-Sri-Lanka-2025.pdf>> accessed 01 April 2026.

operational costs but also increases the pressure on medical infrastructure, indicating the broader fiscal and humanitarian challenges within Sri Lanka's prison system.⁷

**NUMBER OF PRISONERS TREATED IN PRISON HOSPITAL & OTHER HOSPITALS
, 2020 - 2024**

Position Type of Treatment	Year				
	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Outdoor Treatment (OPD)					
Prison Hospital	267,638	292,719	357,038	340,672	395,229
Outside Clinics	4,793	8,746	33,890	11,804	12,853
Total	272,431	301,465	390,928	352,476	408,082
Indoor Treatment (Admissions)					
Prison Hospital	11,862	5,540	11,958	16,631	21,608
National Hospital, Colombo	93	833	1,816	2,181	1,664
Ayurvedic Hospitals	1	0	0	1	0
Victoria Memorial Eye Hospital	12	0	199	19	84
Mental Hospital	31	68	353	156	406
Chest Hospital, Welisara	12	39	12	22	47
Other Hospitals	722	75	73	51	54
Total	12,733	6,555	14,411	19,061	23,863
Grand Total	285,164	308,020	405,339	371,537	431,945

Figure 02

Fiscal and Macroeconomic impact of incarceration

Considering these issues of overcrowding and associated increase in operational costs, it's pertinent to examine the data of actual prison expenditure to understand the financial burden placed on the government by the Sri Lankan prison system. The most recent statistical data from Sri Lankan prisons can be found in the 2023 Statement of Fiscal Performance by the Ministry of Justice, Prison Affairs, and Constitutional Reforms, where it is revealed that the total actual expenditure for the year 2023 by the prisons was Rs. 5,182,541,640, with Rs. 3,741,306,294 as recurrent expenditure and Rs. 1,441,235,348 as capital expenditure.⁸ While this expenditure in

⁷ Department of Prisons Sri Lanka, *A Right Based Correctional System for a Safer Society* (Prison Reform Implementation Plan 2021–2025, 2020) <<http://prisons.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Prison-reform-implementation-plan-2021-2025.pdf>> accessed 10 February 2026.

⁸ Ministry of Justice, Prison Affairs and Constitutional Reforms, *Annual Performance Report - 2023: Expenditure Head Nos 110 & 228* (2023) <https://www.moj.gov.lk/images/pdf/progress_report/2022/Performance-Report-2023-Eng.pdf> accessed 1 April 2026.

isolation may seem substantial, it would be beneficial to place it in the broader context of tax income and state expenditure. In the year 2023, the government revenue, including grants, was Rs. 3,074.3 billion while the expenditure summed up to Rs. 5,356.6 billion, in accordance with the data presented in the Final Budget Position Report 2023 by the Ministry of Finance, Economic Stabilisation & National Policies, Sri Lanka.⁹

Thus, the prison system absorbed approximately 0.097% and 0.169% of the total government expenditure and total government revenue, respectively.

In a macroeconomic sense, the absorption of taxpayer money may seem meagre. However, these statistics do not reveal the additional burden that the state is imposed on, as individuals who are an active part of the economy are shackled behind walls, unable to live to their full economic potential due to incarceration. Accordingly, it is necessary to explore the unique models of prison industries as a potential solution to resolve these rising issues of state dependency of the overcrowded, lethargic prison system in Sri Lanka.

Theoretical Foundations of Prison Industries

Retributive vs Restorative Justice in Prison Industry Models

When modelling the prison-industrial complex, a dilemma arises from the contrasting expectations society has of what the prison system is supposed to achieve. Generally, criminal justice systems are either based on retributive justice or restorative justice, with the former focusing on punishing offenders in proportion to the crime committed, and the latter attempting to rehabilitate offenders by helping them make amends to their victims. Retributive justice systems are based on the ideology of ‘an eye for an eye’ and emphasise punishment over redemption. Such systems bring *“the attitudes of retribution, repression, and exclusion”*.¹⁰ Restorative justice, on the other hand, aims to *“recreate a working community that supports the rehabilitation of offenders and victims and is active in preventing crime”*.¹¹

⁹ Ministry of Finance, Economic Stabilization and National Policies, *Final Budget Position Report (Annual Report) 2023 (2024)* <<https://www.treasury.gov.lk/api/file/ad12f7fa-d2db-43d4-9daa-9270ee7b7cac>> accessed 1 April 2026.

¹⁰ Mead GH, ‘The Psychology of Punitive Justice’ (1918) 23(5) American Journal of Sociology <https://ia800607.us.archive.org/view_archive.php?archive=/8/items/crossref-pre-1923-scholarly-works/10.1086%252F212580.zip&file=10.1086%252F212795.pdf> accessed 01 April 2026.

¹¹ Marshall TF, *Restorative Justice: An Overview* (Home Office 1999).

Considering that this study attempts to view the prison system as an economic model that satisfies both operational costs of the prison while reducing recidivism by incorporating inmates as a productive labour force, it is vital to look into how these two approaches contribute to achieving these goals.

The National Institute of Justice defines recidivism as criminal acts resulting in rearrest, reconviction, or return to incarceration during a follow-up window, typically three to five years after release.¹² Countries that follow the restorative approach tend to have lower incarceration and recidivism rates than those that follow the retributive approach. This is illustrated in the significant contrast between Norway's and the USA's recidivism rates, where Norway's restorative system follows a low incarceration rate of 75 per 100,000 people, compared to 707 per 100,000 people in the United States, which follows a retributive system, showcasing a staggering difference from 20% to 76.6% between the two countries.¹³

Rehabilitative Approach in the Current Sri Lankan System

The current Sri Lankan prison system's objective aligns with the restorative goal in theory, as it recognises a rehabilitative approach, since the 1910s when the British introduced the concept of improving prisoners in the light of rehabilitation. Rehabilitation is a term that is broadly accepted to mean a planned intervention which aims to bring about change in some aspect of the offender that is believed to cause the offender's criminality, such as attitude, cognitive processes, personality, or mental health.¹⁴ The vision of the Sri Lankan prison system is "Social reintegration of inmates as good citizens through rehabilitation."¹⁵ Thus, the purpose of reducing criminal recidivism and addressing social integration challenges remains a primary objective of the Sri Lankan prison system, despite perhaps the public attitude of prisons remaining otherwise. To

¹² National Institute of Justice, 'Recidivism' (*National Institute of Justice*) <<https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/corrections/recidivism>> accessed 1 May 2026.

¹³ Sahni V, 'A Comparative Study on Prison Systems: Tihar and Halden' (2020) 8(7) *International Journal of Advanced Research* <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343739476_A_COMPARATIVE_STUDY_ON_PRISON_SYSTEMS_TIHAR_AND_HALDEN> accessed 9 April 2026.

¹⁴ Cullen FT and Gendreau P, 'Assessing Correctional Rehabilitation: Policy, Practice and Prospects' (2000) 3 *Criminal Justice* <https://www.d.umn.edu/~jmaahs/Correctional%20Assessment/cullen%20and%20gendreau_CJ2000.pdf> accessed 01 April 2026.

¹⁵ Department of Prisons, *Prison Statistics of Sri Lanka 2025* (Department of Prisons, 2025) <<http://prisons.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Prison-Statistics-of-Sri-Lanka-2025.pdf>> accessed 01 April 2026.

materialise this attitudinal change, the Sri Lankan penal law has taken several measures, such as recognising offenders who are aged between 18 and 22 years as a separate category, and referring them to open correctional centres, such as the Training School for Youthful Offenders called the Borstal Institute, and Open Correctional Centres for Youthful Offenders.¹⁶

From 1920 to 1925, large-scale industries were introduced in prisons of Sri Lanka to develop prisoners' vocational skills, such as carpentry, weaving and handicraft. More recently, educational programmes such as computer programming, shorthand typing, and English teaching were introduced with a new section to the Busse Detention Camp being set up in June 2022 for the rehabilitation of drug addicted prisoners.¹⁷

In 1950, the open prison system was introduced in Sri Lanka, being the first to adopt this in Asia. An open jail, also known as an open prison or minimum-security prison, is a type of correctional facility where inmates are given greater freedom of movement and engagement in productive activities compared to traditional prisons, and thereby emphasises rehabilitation.¹⁸ The open prison at Pallekelle was established in 1957, and in 1988, three others were established at Anuradhapura, Batticaloa and Jaffna. In 1974, the work release system was introduced. Under this scheme, selected prisoners are allowed to find employment in the open community, unescorted during the day, and to return to a work release centre or a prison for the night. In 1980, a system of work camps for short-term and medium-term prisoners was introduced, where prisoners could stay in a prison without a perimeter wall under minimum security conditions.¹⁹

It is, however, necessary to determine whether a prison industry system which follows such a rehabilitative model can, in actual practice, contribute towards the reduction of recidivism rates within the Sri Lankan context. Thereby, consideration must be given to the forms of criminal activity that may be effectively addressed through rehabilitative measures, and among them, the most apparent being drug-related crimes.

¹⁶ Statistics Division, Prison Headquarters of Sri Lanka, *Prison Statistics of Sri Lanka* (2009).

¹⁷ Niriella M, 'Effective prison rehabilitation system: Special reference to Sri Lanka' (2010) 7(3) US-China Law Review
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342623878_Effective_Prison_Rehabilitation_System_Special_Reference_to_Sri_Lanka> accessed 10 February 2026.

¹⁸ Khan SN, 'Open Jails in Criminology: A Critical Study of Rehabilitation, Reintegration and Reform' (*Legal Service India*, 18 September 2025) <<https://www.legalserviceindia.com/Legal-Articles/open-jails-in-criminology-rehabilitation-reintegration-reform/>> accessed 1 May 2026.

¹⁹ Ibid 15.

The Cycle of Recidivism and Drug-Related Offences

The deficiencies of the current rehabilitation system are reflected by the rate of recidivism of prisoners in Sri Lanka. In 2023, a striking 57.2% of prisoners who were convicted were repeat offenders, with some even being reconvicted 11 times over.²⁰ Clearly, the system requires considerable reform.

This is evident from the recent statistics from the Department of Prisons, Sri Lanka. It shows that convictions for narcotic drug offences account for 65.5% (31,314) of all convictions, compared to excise offences at 10% (4,802) and other offences at 24.4% (11,667). Among those drug-related cases, heroin remains the most commonly used substance, accounting for 16,664 cases (53.2%) (Refer Figure 03).²¹

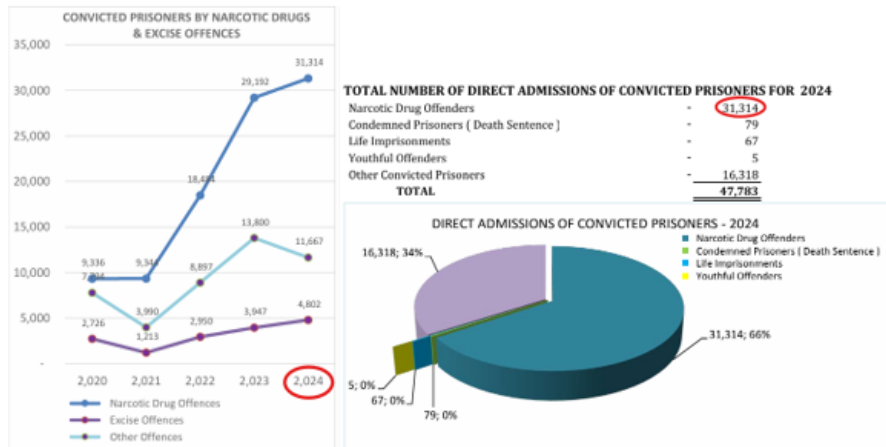
²⁰ *Ibid* 6, Page 43.

²¹ Department of Prisons, *Prison Statistics of Sri Lanka 2025* (Department of Prisons, 2025) <<http://prisons.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Prison-Statistics-of-Sri-Lanka-2025.pdf>> accessed 01 April 2026.

DIRECT ADMISSIONS OF CONVICTED PRISONERS BY NARCOTIC DRUGS & EXCISE OFFENCES, 2020 - 2024

Offence	Year							
	2020	%	2021	%	2022	%	2023	%
Narcotic Drug Offences	9,336	47.0	9,344	64.2	18,484	60.9	29,192	62.2
Excise Offences	2,726	13.7	1,213	8.3	2,950	9.7	3,947	8.4
Other Offences	7,794	39.3	3,990	27.4	8,897	29.3	13,800	29.4
Total	19,856	100.0	14,547	100.0	30,331	100	46,939	100.0

Source: Department of Prisons



DRUG OFFENDERS BY TYPE OF DRUGS, 2013 - 2024

Year	Ice	%	Heroin	%	Cannabis	%	Opium	%	Tablets	%	Other	%	Total
2013			7,245	69.3	3,199	30.6	4	-	-	-	-	-	10,448
2014			8,112	67.7	3,866	32.2	-	-	1	-	11	0.1	11,990
2015			7,519	67.3	3,648	32.7	3	-	-	-	1	-	11,171
2016			7,783	73.9	2,739	26.0	6	0.1	4	-	3	-	10,535
2017			7,706	72.8	2,858	27.0	14	0.1	7	0.1	4	-	10,589
2018			10,412	81.2	2,387	18.6	7	0.1	5	-	5	-	12,816
2019			11,997	79.3	2,131	14.1	806	5.3	12	0.1	177	1.2	15,123
2020			7,974	85.4	1,277	13.7	4	-	3	-	78	0.8	9,336
2021	11	0.1	7,083	75.8	910	9.7	13	-	21	-	1,306	14.0	9,344
2022	3,240	17.0	12,913	67.6	2,656	13.9	167	1	44	-	74	0.4	19,094
2023	8,496	29.1	16,858	57.7	3,422	11.7	24	0.1	330	1.1	62	0.2	29,192
2024	9,454	30.2	16,664	53.2	4,988	15.9	16	0.1	126	0.4	66	0.2	31,314

Source: Department of Prisons

Figure 03

As shown in Figure 04, there is a considerable increase in drug offences due to the offender patterns, which indicate a continuing cycle of reoffending. It shows 9,170 offenders (29.3%) identified as first offenders, 10,866 (34.7%) as reconvicted offenders, and 11,278 (36.0%) as recidivists (Refer Figure 04).²² As a result, many individuals who engage in such offences repeatedly re-enter the prison system, creating a continuous cycle of arrest, imprisonment, release, and re-imprisonment. This recurring pattern shows the broader failure of rehabilitation and

²² Department of Prisons, *Prison Statistics of Sri Lanka 2025* (Department of Prisons, 2025) <<http://prisons.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Prison-Statistics-of-Sri-Lanka-2025.pdf>> accessed 01 April 2026.

reintegration mechanisms within Sri Lanka's prison system, particularly in relation to employment-oriented rehabilitation.

DRUG OFFENDERS BY FIRST OFFENDERS, RECONVICTED & RECIDIVIST , 2021 - 2024							
Year	First Offenders	Reconvicted	Recidivist	Total	Percentage		
					First Offenders	Reconvicted	Recidivist
2021	4,100	3,542	1,702	9,344	43.9	37.9	18.2
2022	9,078	6,639	3,377	19,094	47.5	34.8	17.7
2023	10,302	10,863	8,027	29,192	35.3	37.2	27.5
2024	9,170	10,866	11,278	31,314	29.3	34.7	36.0

Source: Department of Prisons

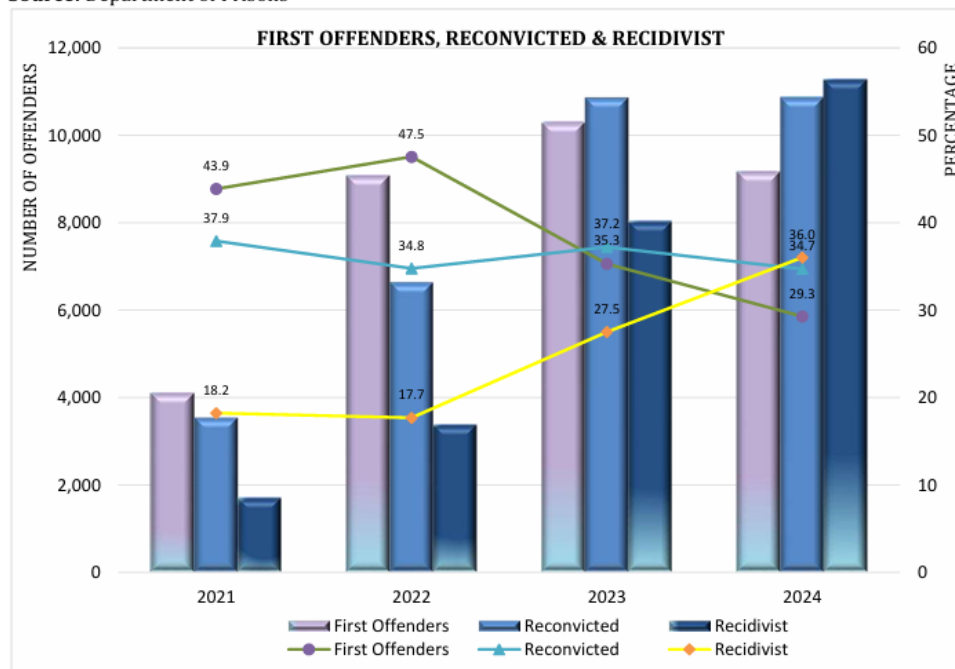


Figure 04

Failures in the Sri Lankan Rehabilitation Model

Despite the current approach of the prison system already reflecting the same objective as the proposed model of rehabilitation, the practical application of said objective remains untranslated. Looking at the limited studies of the current model, several broad issues that limit the prison system from achieving this goal can be recognised, among them the most obvious being limited resources. The lack of funding and resources, particularly the lack of Rehabilitation and Counselling officers,

is seen as the primary impediment to effective rehabilitation in prison.²³ Prisons in Sri Lanka are frequently neglected, with prison industries not being viewed as a priority investment by the government, particularly given the context of continuous economic survival of the State amidst global instability.

Limitations of existing rehabilitation programmes

Conventionally, the main objective of prison labour is to help inmates acquire practical skills that may help them in securing stable employment and rebuilding their lives following release. However, prison labour programmes in Sri Lanka frequently fail to provide incarcerated individuals with transferable and marketable skills. This is largely because the majority of prison work programmes involve repetitive or menial tasks with limited economic value. Specifically, prison activities are centred around agriculture, which is often impractical for prisoners returning to urban environments where access to agricultural land and related employment opportunities is limited.²⁴

This highlights how prison labour fails to create pathways toward stable post-release employment, thereby limiting inmates' ability to reintegrate into society productively.²⁵

Employment barriers and social stigma

Additionally, former prisoners frequently encounter substantial barriers to employment due to low levels of education, limited prior work experience, and the stigma associated with criminal records. Studies also indicate that many employers remain reluctant to hire individuals with prior convictions, significantly restricting their access to legitimate employment opportunities. Consequently, the absence of stable and adequately paid employment increases the likelihood of reoffending, perpetuating the cycle of unemployment, crime, and incarceration.²⁶

²³ Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, *Prison Study by the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka* (2020) <<https://www.hrcsl.lk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Prison-Report-Final-2.pdf>> accessed 1 April 2026.

²⁴ Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, *Prison Study by the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka* (2020) <<https://www.hrcsl.lk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Prison-Report-Final-2.pdf>> accessed 10 February 2026.

²⁵ Kevin Schnepel, 'Do Post-Prison Job Opportunities Reduce Recidivism?' (*IZA World of Labor*, November 2017) <[that maximises the concept of the prison-industrialhttps://wol.iza.org/uploads/articles/399/pdfs/do-post-prison-job-opportunities-reduce-recidivism.pdf](https://wol.iza.org/uploads/articles/399/pdfs/do-post-prison-job-opportunities-reduce-recidivism.pdf)> accessed 10 February 2026.

²⁶ Kevin Schnepel, 'Do Post-Prison Job Opportunities Reduce Recidivism?' (*IZA World of Labor*, November 2017) <<https://wol.iza.org/uploads/articles/399/pdfs/do-post-prison-job-opportunities-reduce-recidivism.pdf>> accessed 10 February 2026.

Structural Failures in Sri Lanka's Prison Industries

There is little data to be found through secondary sources on the current model of the Sri Lankan prison system. The current model mostly encompasses both state-driven and public-private partnership-driven industries, which hire a limited number of detainees based on a skill level, for extremely low pay. As the production potential of these industries consistently fluctuates with unreliable supply chains, due to various external factors like the pandemic or economic crises, these industries remain largely unsustainable and fail to address the idle labour force behind the prison walls.

Decline of industrial productivity

The 2024 prison report reveals various industrial and agricultural outputs of the overall prison system and its progression across the years of 2019-2023. Interestingly to note, while agriculture has steadily gained momentum with a sharp rise since 2021, industries like bakery and blacksmithery experienced a significant decline by 2022. While they did account for gradual growth since 2022, the rise of the agricultural industry remains at the forefront. The statistics also reveal other industries commonly found in the prison industry, like carpentry, polishing, masonry, motor mechanism, etc., which maintain a significantly lower level of output compared to

agriculture

and

bakery.²⁷

Table 9.1
VALUE OF INDUSTRIAL & AGRICULTURAL OUTPUT, 2019 - 2023

Item	Year									
	2019		2020		2021		2022		2023	
	Rs.	%	Rs.	%	Rs.	%	Rs.	%	Rs.	%
Laundry	2,610,922	1.6	1,581,738	1.0	931,782	0.6	2,251,226	1.3	4,078,662	1.7
Bakery	93,214,362	57.0	92,127,354	56.8	79,540,747	48.9	38,340,851	22.0	65,662,631	26.8
Printing	2,806,288	1.7	788,625	0.5	1,106,560	0.7	1,004,170	0.6	2,722,735	1.1
Black smithy / Welding	8,179,728	5.0	6,034,900	3.7	11,999,753	7.4	5,808,787	3.3	17,290,812	7.1
Carpentry, Polishing	3,210,887	2.0	2,944,474	1.8	2,355,483	1.4	6,643,937	3.8	6,462,423	2.6
Tailoring	2,515,196	1.5	2,243,005	1.4	7,821,496	4.8	31,101,852	17.9	25,663,140	10.5
Motor Mechanism	5,837,110	3.6	4,191,840	2.6	4,350,714	2.7	4,081,699	2.3	9,353,040	3.8
Soap Making	1,318,337	0.8	1,377,475	0.8	2,183,270	1.3	1,556,134	0.9	3,241,134	1.3
Coir Making	2,623,092	1.6	1,835,705	1.1	1,409,555	0.9	2,839,323	1.6	3,529,352	1.4
Weaving	1,193,260	0.7	675,423	0.4	2,103,380	1.3	2,353,820	1.4	416,680	0.2
Masonry	73,675	0.0	924,224	0.6	1,497,624	0.9	2,378,024	1.4	4,902,091	2.0
Plumbing	482,329	0.3	385,062	0.2	492,010	0.3	768,515	0.4	1,403,818	0.6
Animal Husbandry	285,950	0.2	338,498	0.2	105,157	0.1	100,704	0.1	91,673	0.0
Agriculture	34,804,299	21.3	41,906,325	25.8	41,352,030	25.4	66,524,844	38.2	92,874,384	37.9
Electricity	509,218	0.3	265,866	0.2	504,174	0.3	1,334,771	0.8	1,831,834	0.7
Coconut Oil	11,691	0.0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Envelops	154,650	0.1	1,763,750	1.1	505,000	0.3	771,725	0.4	1,599,875	0.7
Bricks Making	1,899,000	1.2	1,820,130	1.1	963,695	0.6	1,626,800	0.9	1,936,300	0.8
Cement blocks	220,763	0.1	527,317	0.3	584,617	0.4	419,560	0.2	216,280	0.1
Coconut Shell Charcoal	-	-	-	-	1,703,425	1.0	77,375	0.0	645,650	0.3
Flower Pots	-	-	-	-	3,510	0.0	22,180	0.0	-	-
Miscellaneous	1,485,264	0.9	491,957	0.3	993,567	0.6	4,230,609	2.4	1,010,543	0.4
Total	163,436,021	100	162,223,668	100	162,507,549	100	174,236,906	100	244,933,057	100

Source: Department of Prisons

Figure 06

The only industry that maintained its momentum of growth without collapse during the 2022 economic crisis was the agricultural industry, which grew in value from Rs. 41,352,030 to Rs. 66,524,844 from 2021 to 2022, while the other significant industry of bakery collapsed from Rs. 79,540,747 to Rs. 38,340,851.²⁸ The collapse of the industrial sector, contrasted with the relative sustainability of the agricultural sector, highlights the prison system's dependence on external

²⁷Department of Prisons, *Prison Statistics of Sri Lanka 2025* (Department of Prisons, 2025) <<http://prisons.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Prison-Statistics-of-Sri-Lanka-2025.pdf>> accessed 01 April 2026.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

resources as a clear indicator of how a lack of self-sufficiency in these industries leads to its unproductivity or collapse. Such self-sufficiency is critical to maintain in prison systems, especially given Sri Lanka's familiarity with long periods of economic crises.

Underutilisation of prison labour

Further shortcomings in the current system are evident in the limited utilisation of inmates' labour potential. The opportunity cost of idle labour in prisons has not yet been quantified in research in the public domain. However, statistics of manpower in the prison systems may provide a considerable idea of such costs. According to the Sri Lankan Labour Force Survey Annual Report, the working population of the state, as calculated based on age, is above 15 years.²⁹ Referring to the Department of Prisons' statistics, 46,295 male inmates and 644 female inmates were directly admitted just in the year 2023 into the prison system, and among them, a total of 46,939 inmate admissions fall into the category of the working age between 15 years and 71 years. Thus, in 2023, 100% of the convict admissions to the prison fell under the category of the working-age population. Further, among said admissions, up to 11,658 inmates had completed GCE (O/L), with 5616 having even passed GCE (A/L). Hence, it is evident that a massive annual opportunity cost is being diverted from productive economic activity every year.³⁰ The limited productive output of these prison systems and the loss of such a potential labour force are detrimental to an already struggling economy.

Thus, a clear response to such an opportunity cost of the idle labour force locked within prisons is to reduce the inflow of individuals into the prison system. This is most effectively achieved with policy interventions outside the correctional facilities themselves. From the perspective of the prison system, a feasible solution exists in strengthening rehabilitation programmes and reducing recidivism rates.³¹ In this context, studies have continuously proven that rehabilitation reduces such recidivism and reconviction, alleviating both the operational costs to the state while also ensuring reintegration of individuals into the labour market post-release. Vocational

²⁹ Department of Census and Statistics, *Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey: Annual Report - 2024 (With Provincial and District Level Data)* (Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, 2025) <https://www.statistics.gov.lk/Resource/en/LabourForce/Annual_Reports/LFS2024.pdf> accessed 2 April 2026.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ LegalClarity Team, 'Does Rehabilitation Reduce Recidivism? The Evidence' (*LegalClarity*, 6 April 2026) <<https://legalclarity.org/does-rehabilitation-reduce-recidivism/>> accessed 1 May 2026.

training, which is important in the context of prison industries, has shown particularly strong employment effects post-release. People who received vocational training in prison were 28 per cent more likely to find jobs after release, and participation in any academic or vocational program increased post-release employment by 13 per cent overall, according to studies.³²

Structural Deficiencies Identified in the Human Rights Commission Prison Study

The Human Rights Commission Prison Study of 2018 was a response to the significant absence of information on prisons in the Sri Lankan public domain and reveals substantial deficiencies in the current prison industry system. This study was conducted based on twenty prisons around the country and exposed how the detention conditions fell far beyond the threshold of basic living standards and how recidivism was high, as opportunities for rehabilitation and effective social and economic reintegration were low.³³

On the matter of rehabilitation, it was stated that there was a significant lack of individualisation in prison labour, as prisoners are not assessed based on their personal skill set, preferences, and former professions, which leads to a lower chance of the inmates learning a marketable economic skill upon release. Further, it was stated that there is a lack of diversity in skills, as the prisoners are limited to seeking low-paying job skills like masonry, brick making, and cultivation. The study also reveals that most existing rehabilitation programs are underfunded, with inmates working with old-fashioned tools, broken equipment, and limited, skilled instructors for guidance.

In the matter of remuneration, the study finds that prisoners receive only a few cents a day for working within the prison, with remuneration rates not being revised for decades. Grade 1 prisoners' lower daily wages were Rs. 1.00, with the highest wage for Grade 4 prisoners being Rs. 2.50. Such meagre and negligible compensation fails to encourage productive work or skill development.

³² United States Department of Justice, 'Justice and Education Departments Announce New Research Showing Prison Education Reduces Recidivism, Saves Money, Improves Employment' (*Press Release*, 22 August 2013) <<https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/pr/justice-and-education-departments-announce-new-research-showing-prison-education-reduces>> accessed 12 May 2026.

³³ Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, *Prison Study by the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka* (2020) <<https://www.hrcsl.lk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Prison-Report-Final-2.pdf>> accessed 1 April 2026.

When it comes to female inmates, the rehabilitation opportunities remain limited to sewing or maintaining cleanliness, with no training in professional skills, which could provide better employment opportunities post-release.

Failures of work-release programmes

In addition to labour within prison itself, work outside the operational facilities under work-release schemes also operates inadequately in addressing rehabilitation. The legal framework in Sri Lanka also recognises work release as a rehabilitative mechanism. According to the rules made by the Minister of Justice pursuant to Section 94 of the Prisons Ordinance (Chapter 54), Rule 221A states that convicted prisoners who have served a sentence of imprisonment exceeding twelve months, and who are eligible for employment, can be employed outside prison premises in identified industries within public or private institutions.³⁴ This Rule enables prisoners to engage in productive employment outside prison walls while facilitating rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

However, despite the availability of this mechanism, work release programmes remain inadequately implemented in practice. This is evident from the statistics relating to prisoners engaged under the work release scheme between 2014 and 2024 (Refer to Figure 07). Although 4,145 prisoners were engaged under the scheme in 2016, participation declined significantly in subsequent years, with only 82 prisoners engaged in 2022, 51 in 2023, and 162 in 2024.³⁵ These data show the limited utilisation of work release programmes despite the availability of a Rule permitting such rehabilitation-oriented employment. Therefore, improving and expanding work release programmes in parallel to prison industry expansion is essential not only to strengthen rehabilitation and reintegration, but also to generate income and contribute economically.

³⁴ Prisons Ordinance No.16 of 1877.

³⁵ Department of Prisons, *Prison Statistics of Sri Lanka 2025* (Department of Prisons, 2025) <<http://prisons.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Prison-Statistics-of-Sri-Lanka-2025.pdf>> accessed 01 April 2026.

Table 8.2
PRISONERS ENGAGED ON WORK RELEASE SCHEME, 2013 - 2023

Year	Number of Prisoners Engaged on Work Released	Number of Found Unsuitable	Total Amount Earned for the Year (Rs.)
2013	1,401	18	2,118,240
2014	511	4	3,222,900
2015	648	-	3,962,660
2016	4,145	-	4,944,695
2017	675	-	5,106,200
2018	547	-	4,526,040
2019	599	-	4,515,800
2020	189	-	993,820
2021	-	-	-
2022	82	1	579,100
2023	51	4	755,793

Source: Department of Prisons

Figure 07

Thus, it is clear that the current rehabilitative prison industry framework operates subpar to the potential they could achieve, both economically and rehabilitatively.

The Human Rights Commission observed that the systemic barriers of the rehabilitation programs were hindering the vision of the Rehabilitation Officers who strongly believed in the potential benefits of said programs. This lack of funding and research highlights a need for attitudinal change of prisons being viewed by governments and society as correctional facilities where prisoners can be rehabilitated, rather than punitive institutions, and with a commensurate increase in investment, both financial and human, in rehabilitation programmes.

Comparative Analysis: The Tihar Jail Model

In attempting to build a sufficient model for the Sri Lankan prison industries, it would be useful to reference a South Asian framework that maximises the concept of the prison-industrial complex through rehabilitation and economic gains. The Tihar prison model is particularly significant in this initiative. Tihar is the largest prison complex currently present within the South Asian continent, which follows the core idea of improving rehabilitation of prisoners and reducing recidivism by providing transferable skills within the prison industry. This correctional approach does not limit itself to vocational training, but extends into education, legal and counselling support, as well as spiritual practices.

Vocational training and certification systems

In 2023, a new framework was proposed for the rehabilitative model of the Tihar Jail, as the National Skill Qualification Framework (NSQF) Level 4 training programme with 340 hours of

coursework was introduced. This was a CSR initiative of a private institution, through which about 1200 inmates would receive educational and vocational training, with the ultimate goal of reducing recidivism rates. The unique advantage of this joint partnership initiative is the certification of the courses to the prisoners, with the National Council for Vocational Training (NCVT) aligning with the guidelines of the Tourism and Hospitality Skill Council (THSC).³⁶ This allows for easier access for the inmates to these markets upon release. Massive partnerships and initiatives such as these, with collaborating stakeholders like the Urban Development Ministry and Mission Convergence of the Delhi government, showcase Tihar Jail's distinctive capacity in reducing recidivism through rehabilitation.

Prison industries and revenue generation

When looking at the Tihar prison industry, the jail runs its own brand called TJ's that produces industrial products from jewellery to detergents. TJ's has now evolved into a multimillion-dollar brand with a high turnover, which adds to the vital revenue stream which functions the jail system. The correctional institute runs its own prison industry, with the inmates making goods under the brand Tihar. Prisoner participation in jobs is based on evaluation of several criteria, including skill level, sentence length, behavioural record, security classification and physical ability.³⁷

The Tihar industry is ever evolving, with its capacity rising to 36 factories just by 2018, and an annual turnover of about ₹35 crore.³⁸ The carpentry unit itself recorded a turnover of Rs 23,14,91,070 in the year 2012-13. This high turnover is attributed to the uninterrupted supply of raw material, the increase in budget allowance, as well as the setting up of additional infrastructure in the factory units, allowing a 2.5 times increase in just one year. This led to a 20 crore jump from

³⁶ Livemint, 'Good news for prison inmates in Tihar! Now, they will get skills training' *mint* (India, 25 November 2023) <<https://www.livemint.com/news/india/good-news-for-prison-inmates-in-tihar-now-they-will-get-skills-training-11700903840103.html>> accessed 9 April 2026.

³⁷ Team CredAble, 'The Economics of Tihar Jail' (*CredAble*, 7 October 2021) <<https://credable.in/insights-by-credable/the-economics-of-tihar-jail/>> accessed 9 April 2026.

³⁸ HT Correspondent, 'Photos: In-house employment for Tihar inmates, for a better life outside' *Hindustan Times* (India, 25 June 2018) <<https://www.hindustantimes.com/photos/india-news/photos-in-house-employment-for-tihar-inmates-for-a-better-life-outside/photo-UCW5h20PrhRS1SSdLNErVJ-1.html>> accessed 5 March 2026.

2012 to 2013, making the carpentry industry the largest contributor to the Tihar prison industry and it has around 600-800 inmates working on it.³⁹

By 2018, the wages of the inmates had been considerably higher with the necessary reforms, with skilled-level workers earning higher wages. 'The wages of the workers have been divided based on their skills. A skilled inmate earns Rs. 99 per day, while the semi-skilled and unskilled inmates earn Rs. 81 and Rs. 70 per day,' said a jail official.⁴⁰ The daily wages are thereby collected by the prisoner administration, with 25% being deducted, and sent to a fund known as the Victim's Welfare Fund, where the money is given to families or victims of crimes committed by the prisoners.⁴¹

Notably, wages are structured differently from free labour markets and are distributed to the areas of prisoner personal savings, family remittances, victim compensation funds, and prison administration costs. When the low number of wages provided to the inmates is taken into consideration, the further split into more trivial matters, such as administrative costs, appears to take away from the inmates' actual capacity to earn something of value. However, an inmate can use these wages to purchase items from prisons, such as toiletries or food, thereby providing some level of motivation to continue to work in these industries.⁴²

The Tihar economic model is designed as a correctional micro-economy structure that is a self-contained economic system operating within a prison, where production, labour allocation, and consumption occur under institutional control is present in Tihar. This leads to the prison adopting a semi-closed institutional economy.

In this model, prisoners become workers, with prison authorities acting as regulators and employers while the prison industries act as production firms. The products of said industries are

³⁹ Press Trust of India, 'Brand TJ registers record turnover of Rs 32 crore' *Business Standard* (New Delhi, 18 May 2013) <https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/brand-tj-registers-record-turnover-of-rs-32-crore-113051800638_1.html> accessed 10 May 2026.

⁴⁰ Banerjee P, 'Tihar gives meaningful work to inmates' *Millennium Post* (Delhi, 18 March 2013) <<https://www.millenniumpost.in/tihar-gives-meaningful-work-to-inmates-22986>> accessed 5 March 2026.

⁴¹ Lama P, 'In Tihar prison's 36 factories, prisoners learn skills for a new life' *Hindustan Times* (New Delhi, 24 June 2018) <<https://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi-news/in-tihar-prison-s-36-factories-prisoners-learn-skills-for-a-new-life/story-RZgWuV4SoIVyk4JnUla7TK.html>> accessed 5 March 2026.

⁴² *Ibid.*

then consumed internally or sold externally. Internal consumption of products reduces the operational costs of the prison, whereas the external sale of goods, under the brand of “*TJ’s – Made in Tihar*”, acts similarly to state-owned manufacturing businesses. The internally consumed goods include uniforms, food items and cleaning supplies, while externally sold products include bakery products, furniture, candles, etc. The prison system technically follows a regulated monopoly market structure with fixed wages and limited mobility within the jobs that are provided to the inmates.

A positive example that attests to the effectiveness of the Tihar model’s rehabilitation can be noted with the campus placement program, which launched in 2011 for the rehabilitation of inmates about to complete their sentences. In 2014, a recruitment drive led to 66 inmates selected based on their good conduct, who received job offers with salaries up to ₹35,000 (US\$410) per month, from as many as 31 recruiters, which included educational institutions, NGOs and private companies.

Limitations and human rights concerns

However, the Tihar model is not without its failures. This system is famously controversial for accommodating more inmates than its capacity. For instance, as of 2016, Tihar jail’s capacity exceeded by 221%, with 14,300 prisoners being accommodated in a capacity of 6500 inmates.⁴³ Regardless of the ‘industrial impact’ presented by this system, studies have revealed the brutal landscape in which inmates are treated, where accommodation problems and health facilities remain below par. According to some interviews, it was revealed by former inmates that the prisoners are treated worse than animals in a zoo and medical care was only provided in case of severe conditions. Many deaths caused by deteriorating health were also passed off as suicide because there were no medical specialists or ambulances available.⁴⁴

⁴³ Sahni V, ‘A Comparative Study on Prison Systems: Tihar and Halden’ (2020) 8(7) *International Journal of Advanced Research* <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343739476_A_COMPARATIVE_STUDY_ON_PRISON_SYSTEMS_TIHAR_AND_HALDEN> accessed 9 April 2026.

⁴⁴ Sahni V, ‘A Comparative Study on Prison Systems: Tihar and Halden’ (2020) 8(7) *International Journal of Advanced Research* <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343739476_A_COMPARATIVE_STUDY_ON_PRISON_SYSTEMS_TIHAR_AND_HALDEN> accessed 9 April 2026.

Thus, when contemplating a model from the Sri Lankan prison system, which faces the same concerns of overcrowding, it becomes vital to strike a balance between prisoner welfare and economic gain. The Tihar system provides a cautionary tale as to how economic progression has not been matched with meeting necessary prisoner standards within the prison system as well. In fact, a more extreme example of such a failed model can be demonstrated in the American prison industrial model, which devolved from correctional rehabilitative institutions to exploitative, commercially driven institutions.

Public-Private Partnerships in Prison Industries

Thus, the reliance upon state authorities to provide solutions to limited resources and maintain prison industries is a counterproductive model. Instead, the model should focus on Public-Private Partnerships with a reasonable proportion of role division between state and private institutions.

Economic benefits and challenges

Public-private partnerships⁴⁵ are characterised by a mix of opportunities and challenges in the context of prison industries. A primary factor that may affect the enhancement of the interaction between private bodies and correctional facilities is the prison's unique ability to offer inexpensive labour and individualised services, with inmates being trained to meet specific partner needs. On the other hand, it must still be recognised that PPP models in prison industries do face significant obstacles which limit their effectiveness. These include internal challenges like the low skill levels of inmates, quality control issues, a deficiency in a consistent labour force, and delays caused by strict security procedures. Legal and institutional deficiencies, such as underdeveloped laws and regulatory frameworks, can also create barriers, along with administrative difficulties in coordinating new industrial activities. Overall, while prison production units have strong potential for business collaboration due to cost and infrastructure advantages, this potential is often constrained by legal, economic, and operational inefficiencies.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Hereinafter referred to as 'PPP.'

⁴⁶ Radchenko and others, 'Public-Private Partnership Projects in Increasing Efficiency of Penal Institutions Production Sector' (ICEST 2020, vol 90, European Publisher 2020) <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346337489_Public-Private_Partnership_Projects_In_Increasing_Efficiency_Of_Penal_Institutions_Production_Sector> accessed 1 April 2026.

There exists a plethora of studies that have recognised the unique capacity of PPP projects to increase the efficiency of correctional labour adaptation centres and production workshops. A unique advantage of private entities having a stake in the prison industries is that private companies promote the development and use of objective performance measures. The government often spends taxpayers' money without an incentive to measure the quality of performance, but private contracts usually specify performance indicators and, to the same extent, broader goals.⁴⁷ This allows for a more structured and production-oriented approach, which achieves the necessary goals of rehabilitation more effectively.

Existing PPP initiatives in Sri Lanka

In the status quo, PPPs already coexist with the unproductive state manufacturing plants, as seen in leather bag manufacturing units in the Welikada prison system, which are fully funded and maintained by a well-reputed private firm in Sri Lanka. All necessary training and materials are provided by the firm, and nearly 20 inmates are working at the unit and earn Rs. 300 per day⁴⁸ (which is significant remuneration considering Rs. 1 that unreformed state industries within the prison system afford).

Types of PPP Models in Prison Industries

Different PPP models of prison industries exist in the present context, and it would be useful to evaluate each in light of the objective of rehabilitation and operational cost.

The employer model is where the private sector owns and operates a business that uses inmate labour to produce goods or services. In this model, the business has full control of hiring, firing, wage distribution, and supervising the inmate labour force.

The investor model, on the other hand, allows the private sector to invest in a business that is operated by the correctional state agency but has no other role in the business beyond such capitalising function. The customer model is where the private sector has no say in the production

⁴⁷ Skosana B, 'The Role of Public-Private Partnerships in Expanding the Delivery of Correctional Services in South Africa' (Keynote Address during the Third Annual Public Private Partnership Global Summit, Hotels van Oranje, Noordwijk, The Netherlands, 6-8 November 2002).

⁴⁸ Sachitra V and Wijewardhana N, 'The Road to Develop Prisoners' Skills and Attitudes: An Analytical Study of Contemporary Prison-Based Rehabilitation Programme in Sri Lanka' (2020) 19(1) Safer Communities <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339005093_The_road_to_develop_prisoners'_skills_and_attitudes_an_analytical_study_of_contemporary_prison-based_rehabilitation_programme_in_Sri_Lanka> accessed 4 April 2026.

means, but is involved by purchasing all or a significant amount of the produced output of a state-owned prison. The bigger the stake of such purchasing power, the more say the private company has on the quality and quantity of the industry's output. In the manager model, the private sector manages a business by a correctional agency, but has no other role in the business.⁴⁹

Sustainability and supply-chain resilience in selecting industries

In the matter of selecting the private partners for the resilient prison industry system within Sri Lanka, an important point of consideration would be the sustainability of such partnerships. Significant attention must be given to the risk of disruptions in the supply chain within these specific industries invited into the prison system, which have the ability to undermine the prison industries' production capacity. For instance, industries that are heavily dependent on imported machinery, specialised components, or complex international imported raw materials can become unsustainable during periods of crisis or market volatility.

Thus, to ensure that sustainable and long-term production within prisons while generating vocational skills on a consistent level, selected prison industries must prioritise partnerships that are skill-heavy while having minimal dependence on external inputs and rely primarily on fixed resources, locally available resources, and manual labour. Industries such as agriculture, food processing, carpentry, tailoring, handicrafts, masonry, coir-based production, bamboo products, and basic manufacturing are particularly suitable in this regard, as they can create transferable vocational skills while maintaining relatively low external market dependence. This would enable prison labour to have continuity in production and consistency in skill development even during periods of economic uncertainty or supply chain disruption.

Additionally, the private partners should also be evaluated on their capacity to maintain stable operations during instances of economic disruptions, their commitment to inmate training, and their ability to continue operations even within resource-constrained environments

Risk of full privatisation

For this proposal, it is important to analyse the pros and cons of full privatisation as seen in the first model, in comparison to the more shared role between the state and private entities as seen in

⁴⁹ Sexton GE, Farrow FC and Auerbach BJ, 'The Private Sector and Prison Industries' (National Institute of Justice, Research in Brief, August 1985) <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/NIJ_private_sector_and_prison_industries.pdf> accessed 4 April 2026.

the others. The full privatisation of prison labour could be argued to be an inherently imprudent course of pursuit, as seen in the case study of the American prison industries. In post Civil War America, due to the unprofitability of state-centred penitentiary models, the state turned to privatisation, which quickly became a dominant form of organising prison labour in the North. Prisons turned to the contract system, in which the state sold prison labour to private firms. While the reformation of incarcerated persons remained a nominal objective, profit maximisation overrode prior concerns about moral reform and the ennobling dimensions of labour. The privatisation of convict labour allowed more exploitative systems with minimum state accountability. Some prisons implemented convict leasing programs, which were cheaper than slavery because the state was not responsible for dealing with the health of their workers.⁵⁰ Compared to prison labour camps, the convict lease system largely removed the state's responsibility for inmate custody and care, placing complete control in private hands. This resulted in the creation of what was considered one of the most inhumane systems of forced labour in the United States during the Reconstruction Era and well into the twentieth century.⁵¹ Thus, it is clear that the state should maintain a dominant stakeholder in the prison industry, particularly in the matter of accountability.

Legal and institutional accountability

Constitutional and writ accountability mechanisms

The state can mainly be held accountable in two main ways. Firstly, accountability may be enforced against prison authorities, under the Fundamental Rights jurisdiction of the Supreme Court under Article 126 of the Constitution, which is read with Article 17 of the Constitution. Article 17 states, *“Every person shall be entitled to apply to the Supreme Court, as provided by Article 126, in respect of the infringement or imminent infringement, by executive or administrative action, of a fundamental right to which such person is entitled under the provisions of this*

⁵⁰ Mohler HC, 'Convict Labor Policies' (1925) 15(4) Journal of the American Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology <<https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1964&context=jclc>> accessed 01 April 2026.

⁵¹ Schmidt BC Jr, 'Principle and Prejudice: The Supreme Court and Race in the Progressive Era. Part 2: The Peonage Cases' (1982) 82 Columbia Law Review.

Chapter.”⁵² Since prison officials and prison administrators exercise executive and administrative power on behalf of the State, their actions may be challenged where they infringe constitutionally guaranteed rights. For example, prisoners can file under Article 11, which guarantees freedom from torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment, particularly in instances involving abusive prison labour conditions, inhumane treatment, denial of medical care, or exploitative working arrangements. Similarly, Article 12(1), which guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the law, may be relied upon where prisoners are subjected to arbitrary or discriminatory treatment without lawful standards, within prison industries. In such times, prisoners can directly apply to the Supreme Court through a Fundamental Rights application filed within one month of the alleged infringement.

In addition to the Fundamental Rights jurisdiction, accountability may also be maintained through the writ jurisdiction of the Court of Appeal under Article 140 of the Constitution. Article 140 of Constitution states *“Subject to the provisions of the Constitution, the Court of Appeal shall have full power and authority to inspect and examine the records of any Court of First Instance or tribunal or other institution and grant and issue, according to law, orders like writs of certiorari, prohibition, procedendo, mandamus and quo warranto against the judge of any Court of First Instance or tribunal or other institution or any other person.”*⁵³ This shows that the writ jurisdiction enables courts to review the legality of administrative actions undertaken by public authorities, including prison officials. For example, a writ of mandamus may be sought to compel prison authorities to perform statutory or legal duties imposed under the Prisons Ordinance or prison regulations, such as ensuring lawful working conditions, payment of authorised remuneration, or access to rehabilitation programmes. Similarly, a writ of certiorari may be used to quash unlawful or procedurally improper administrative decisions relating to prison labour schemes or disciplinary measures imposed on prisoners. Additionally, a writ of prohibition may prevent prison authorities from acting beyond the powers conferred upon them by law.

These constitutional and administrative remedies are important because they highlight judicial oversight over prison administration and ensure that prison industries remain accountable to public

⁵² Article 17, The Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic Of Sri Lanka (As amended up to 31st October 2022).

⁵³ Article 140, The Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic Of Sri Lanka (As amended up to 31st October 2022).

law principles. Unlike purely private entities, State authorities remain answerable before the courts for violations of legality, procedural fairness, and constitutional rights. Therefore, keeping the Government as the principal stakeholder within prison industries provides prisoners with a clear and more effective method for legal accountability and protection under Sri Lankan law.

Thus, while the State should remain the primary stakeholder in the prison system, it is necessary to maintain a balance that accommodates the legitimate interests and operational requirements of private stakeholders as well. A generalised breakdown of role division on a percentage basis between the state and the private industry would not, however, be plausible, as these industries will span across many sectors, and the private entities' role may differ accordingly. Consequently, while excluding the fully privatised model, other PPP models can be selectively adopted based on the distinct needs of the industry and the private entities involved.

Supplementary Accountability Mechanisms

Independent auditing and oversight mechanisms

To increase accountability of the private companies that end up having a stake in the prison industry system, considerable attention should be given to a filtering mechanism or auditing. This can be carried out on a state level or perhaps more transparently in concert with a reputable independent oversight body, particularly with an interest in prisoner rights like the Committee for Protecting Rights of Prisoners (CPRP) or international bodies like the Red Cross and UNHRC.

Regarding the ultimate selection of industries, they must remain focused on rehabilitation by ensuring they align with current market trends and provide transferable skills. Instead of the prison labour simply being attributed to cheap manpower that could be easily replaced by a machine, skills that can be translated into the job market outside the prison walls should be prioritised. Considering Sri Lanka's economic system, this would mean industries like textile, agriculture, carpentry, etc.

Upon analysing the necessary criteria of the private organisations, including their reputation regarding labour matters, their proposed wage and compensation structures, working conditions, and rehabilitative components, the audit may ensure the prison industries are standardised and humane. If needed, such periodic re-audits may be revisited to maintain consistent compliance.

Existing regulatory safeguards in the prison system

In addition to such accountability mechanisms, it is essential to establish and maintain robust legal provisions to safeguard prisoners' welfare within these prison industries and make such protections legally mandatory. The Prison Ordinance itself provides some safeguards to the prison inmates. According to Section 52 of the Prison Ordinance in Sri Lanka, every prison must ensure that prisoners sentenced to hard labour can serve their sentence and necessary arrangements and facilities are provided in the prison for the enforcement of hard labour. Further, Section 64 seeks to protect prisoners' health by requiring medical officers to periodically examine labouring prisoners and restrict hard labour where it may be harmful and allowing them to be reassigned to lighter duties.⁵⁴

Workplace safety and labour standards

However, in reality, these legal safeguards are often not properly implemented. A majority of incarcerated workers do not receive formal job training and necessary arrangements to work. Then, those incarcerated workers with minimal experience or training are assigned to hazardous work. For example, the absence of standard protective equipment exposes prisoners to preventable injuries and even death. Further, working conditions are often poor, with unsafe, poorly ventilated environments, minimal safety equipment, and a lack of medical oversight. While general labour laws such as the Shop and Office Employees Act and the Factories Ordinance ensure safe working conditions for other workers, incarcerated workers are often required to work in inherently dangerous conditions, including exposure to dangerous toxins on the job. Additionally, prisoners are frequently given insufficient breaks, sometimes required to work throughout the week, and may even be made to work despite illness, leading many to perceive labour as punishment rather than rehabilitation. These issues are compounded by a lack of modern tools, inadequate training support and extremely low wages that have remained unchanged for decades. Therefore, there's a serious criticism about prison labour and describes it as a State-sanctioned form of slavery and servitude.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Prisons Ordinance No.16 of 1877.

⁵⁵ Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, *Prison Study by the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka* (2020) <<https://www.hrcsl.lk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Prison-Report-Final-2.pdf>> accessed 1 April 2026.

Considering these limitations, it is therefore recommended that prison labour systems be reformed to align with modern labour standards.

Injuries among incarcerated workers can be significantly reduced through the introduction of proper training, machine-guarding mechanisms, and adequate personal protective equipment standards that are routinely expected in workplaces outside prisons. This shows that ensuring safe working conditions must be a priority, with clear compliance with health and safety regulations. This includes regular risk assessments, provision of safety gear, and proper supervision to prevent avoidable harm.⁵⁶

Further, it is also essential to guarantee incarcerated workers the same fundamental labour and wage protections afforded to other workers. These include the right to a minimum wage, safe and healthy working conditions and protection from discrimination.

Aligning prison labour systems with broader labour standards would promote fairness and accountability. A major reform that could be suggested is the revision of prisoner wages and the regulation of wage deductions. By paying incarcerated workers in accordance with the National Minimum Wage of Workers Act No. 3 of 2016, prisoners would be better able to meet essential needs such as supporting their families, maintaining communication with loved ones, and covering personal expenses. Fair wages would also allow prisoners to save for reintegration into society, thereby supporting successful re-entry.⁵⁷

Prison complaints procedures

Further accountability measures may also expand to include a prison complaints procedure. This can function as a primary internal mechanism through which incarcerated persons can report unfair treatment, administrative misconduct, which eventually violates their rights. It is a design that makes sure that grievances are addressed at the institutional level before they extend to external complaints or legal action, ensuring that the system aims to resolve disputes efficiently and uphold minimum standards of humane treatment within the prison environment itself.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Centre for Policy Alternatives, *The Need for Prison Reforms in Sri Lanka* (2020) <<https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/BF-Prison-Reforms-May-2020-FINAL-DRAFT.-edited3.pdf>> accessed 10 February 2026.

Before initiating a formal complaint, prisoners should be generally encouraged to attempt informal resolution. This may involve speaking directly with prison officers or submitting a written request through available application forms. This preliminary step is intended to resolve minor issues quickly and reduce unnecessary formal complaints. However, where informal resolution is not possible or appropriate, prisoners are entitled to proceed with the formal complaint mechanism. The formal process requires prisoners to submit a designated complaint form, including the grievance and remedy sought. Where a prisoner is unable to complete a written complaint due to literacy or language barriers, provisions must be made for verbal submission to prison staff or submission in a preferred language. Then, it is submitted through secure complaint boxes located within the prison.

Such complaints are expected to be addressed within a set timeframe, with interim responses provided in cases of delay, and decisions are made based on the balance of probabilities. Where a prisoner is dissatisfied with the outcome, an appeal mechanism is available, which will be reviewed by a more senior officer who was not involved in the original decision. If the matter remains unresolved after appeal, further escalation to external oversight mechanisms is possible, allowing independent review of prison-related grievances. Importantly, for sensitive matters, a confidential complaint route should exist.

However, certain categories of complaints are treated as outside the scope of internal prison handling and are instead directed through a separate administrative pathway. These typically include matters involving high-level allegations, litigation-related issues, or immigration-related concerns. In such cases, internal appeal rights may be limited, and external review becomes the primary avenue for further action.

Although Sri Lanka already has several institutional mechanisms in place to address prison-related grievances, like HRC and the Committee for Protecting Rights of Prisoners, including internal complaint systems and external oversight bodies, their practical effectiveness remains limited. In many instances, delays in response, lack of transparency, fear of retaliation, and inadequate follow-up reduce the accessibility and reliability of these mechanisms for prisoners. As a result, while the legal and administrative framework appears comprehensive on paper, its implementation in practice does not consistently ensure timely redress or meaningful accountability, highlighting the need for stronger enforcement and structural reform.

Certification, Skill Development, and Individualised Rehabilitation

In the matter of rehabilitation, while the status quo divides the prisoners based on skill and grade level, the same system can be restructured to an NVQ-based system, which, upon completion by the inmates, can offer certification by the company or the prison itself. Instead of orienting the certificates based on profession, it would be of interest to grant skill-based certification, which would ultimately ensure flexibility in employment post-release.

Such certification is of primary interest as seen in UNODC's research on prisons in Albania, Czechia, and Thailand, which highlighted a strong desire among prisoners for high-quality, market-relevant vocational training that leads to recognised certification, in the context of supporting meaningful employment after release. Across these multiple contexts, prisoners question the value of programmes that fall short of these standards or fail to provide formal qualifications.⁵⁸

According to the UNHRC report, the effectiveness of the current rehabilitation model is undermined by the non-specialised assignment of work to inmates. Thus, to ensure an individualised rehabilitative model, due consideration of the prisoner's existing skills, preferences, and plans would be important to ensure that potential rehabilitative goals are being met. Additionally, flexibility in work party allocation, where possible, if it can be established that the assigned work is not the best fit for a particular prisoner, is an important consideration.⁵⁹

Revenue Distribution and Prisoner Remuneration

Upon establishing said structures, it is important to look at revenue distribution models and prisoner compensation frameworks. The current prison system allows prisoners to earn an income as a regular employee under work release, and a subpar income under privately owned firms within the prison. However, the reality in most industries of the prison is that the employee wages are unreasonably low, with the lowest daily wage for Grade 1 prisoners is currently Rs. 1.00, while the highest daily wage for Grade 4 prisoners is Rs. 2.50.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes, *Prison Research: A Pilot Study on the Causes of Recidivism in Albania, Czechia and Thailand* (2022) < https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/prison/Pilot_prison_research_brief_2022.pdf> accessed 1 April 2026.

⁵⁹ *Ibid* 6 page 67

⁶⁰ *Ibid* 6

A reasonable remuneration of the convicted prisoner's labour from an ethical standpoint is obvious. However, when viewed through an economic lens, this can also be justified as a viable solution for the overcrowding of prisons. In the status quo, a large number of convicted prisoners serve imprisonment due to the inability to pay fines and the non-payment of debt or maintenance. In a system where the poor are disproportionately imprisoned for their lack of finances, a reasonable remuneration model within the prison could provide them an alternative, which will enable them to earn an income and even pay back maintenance arrears.⁶¹

While work release remains a viable option for such prisoners to earn a daily income at the rate of regular employees or slightly below, the reality of work release in the prison system today presents a bleak picture of the number of prisoners engaged. According to the Department of Prisons' statistics, in 2013, the number of prisoners engaged on work release was 1401, and total annual revenue summed up to a grand total of Rs. 2, 118,240. Compared to that, the 2023 report reveals a staggering fall to 51 employees being engaged on work release with a total of Rs. 755,793 annual turnover. Thus, reforming the current state of remuneration should be considered to provide financial relief in addition to incentives for growth within the industry. To ensure such an incentive exists, the remuneration should increase with each grade level.

Once the total revenue has been established, following a similar structure in the Tihar prison system, the revenue must be split between the operational cost of the state (on the prison costs and reinvestments on the rehabilitation programs, including training, equipment, etc.), meaningful remuneration of the prisoners, and, if necessary, a victim welfare fund.

Department of Prisons' proposal for revenue sharing

In 2023, the Department of Prisons produced a proposal with such a mechanism incorporating a clearer revenue-sharing mechanism in relation to prison labour and rehabilitation industries. For that, the Department of Prisons invited private, semi-government and public sector institutions interested in the process of prisoner rehabilitation to train and employ inmates and to start industries within the premises of the prisons. The main objectives were to socio-reintegrate the inmate as a better careerist and citizen with competent and professional skills as well as to provide economic strength to the inmate's family and to integrate the hidden labour force back into the production process of the country under a reasonable payment. Under the proposed framework,

⁶¹ Ibid 6 page 32

inmates were permitted to engage in employment only between 8.00 am and 3.30 pm, with industries primarily focused on manufacturing, services, agriculture, and construction. More importantly, the proposal introduced a structured payment mechanism under Prison Circulars and relevant legal provisions, establishing a transparent formula for the allocation of revenue generated through prison labour. (Refer to Figure 08)⁶² The proposal shows that the daily wage allocation connected to prison labour can amount to as much as Rs. 1,184.00 per inmate per day under industries operated within prison premises. This clearly reflects an institutional recognition by the Department of Prisons itself that the current remuneration framework is inadequate and fails to proportionately compensate prisoners for the labour performed. Compared to the existing prison wage structure, where inmates receive only negligible amounts that have remained unchanged for decades, the 2023 proposal demonstrates that considerably higher and more meaningful remuneration is both economically feasible and administratively achievable within the prison industry system.

⁶² Department of Prisons Sri Lanka, *A Transformational Change to the National Labour Force: The Department of Prisons in Sri Lanka invites the private sector to add unimprisoned labour of inmates in custody to the production process of the country* (prisons, 2023) <<http://prisons.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/PPP-project-ad-and-details-EN.pdf>> accessed 10 February 2026.

1. Payment to be made on behalf of the inmate in industries carried on by the private sector inside the prison

Daily wage per inmate	=	Rs. 640.00
The amount to be charged to government revenue (Rs. 640*75%)		Rs. 480.00
The amount due to the Prisoner Welfare Fund 640*10%		Rs. 64.00
The amount to be charged per day per inmate		Rs.1,184.00

Apart from this, a reasonable monthly rent should be paid for the works to be started in the prison premises and water and electricity bills for the relevant building should be paid as well. Further, all the minor maintenance activities of the said building should be carried out during the relevant period.

2. Payment to be made on behalf of the inmate in industries carried on by the private sector at places outside prison institutions

Daily wage per inmate	=	Rs. 640.00
The amount to be charged to government revenue (Rs. 640*50%)		Rs. 320.00
The amount due to the Prisoner Welfare Fund 640*10%		Rs. 64.00
The amount to be charged per day per inmate		Rs.1024.00

In addition, when escorting out of prison, food, medical aid, transport facilities and daily allowances for escort officers should be paid and also insurance coverage should be provided during working hours as well.

Figure 08

Therefore, future reforms should adopt a similarly clear formula-based revenue allocation mechanism that expressly identifies the proportion of earnings directed toward prisoner remuneration, government operational costs, rehabilitation and training programmes, and prisoner welfare funds.

Prisoners' welfare funds

Further, this can be supported by the Department of Prisons Prisoners' Welfare Fund Law, No. 18 of 1973 which includes this prison labour into a broader welfare framework. Under Section 4, proceeds from the sale of prisoners' products, charges for prison labour supplied to institutions, and profits from exhibitions and sales are credited to the Prisoners' Welfare Fund. Section 5 provides that these funds may be used by the Commissioner of Prisons to support prisoners' spiritual, educational, and recreational welfare, as well as to provide rewards and financial

assistance for activities such as exhibitions and canteen maintenance.⁶³ This legislative attitude showcases how even the written law of Sri Lanka views prison labour beyond the context of discipline and rehabilitation into welfare and development of prisoners.

Moreover, despite allowing remuneration, to avoid internal inequality, it must be maintained that the prisoners cannot directly spend earnings within the prison itself. However, they must be provided by means of releasing income to their dependents outside the prison. A transparent administrative appeal system could be established to manage family support requests, ensuring fairness by considering the family's circumstances, the prisoner's consent to such support, and any legal maintenance obligations. This balances moral responsibility towards dependents and protects the prisoner from exploitation of their earnings.

Upon release, the accumulated earnings of the prisoner should have a mechanism to be released gradually through a restricted bank account, with necessary monitoring mechanisms to prevent misuse. This method would allow for the reduction of post-release destitution, or first-day poverty, which may lead to eventual recidivism.

Post-Release Reintegration and Employment

Upon release, beyond having a certain fund accumulated, it is important to ensure that the prison system follows the rehabilitation process through a reintegration pipeline. In order to incentivise absorption of released prisoner labour by companies (notably the companies which engaged in the rehabilitative programs in the first place), governments can offer tax incentives, subsidies, and security guarantees if necessary. In an economic sense, such government intervention would guarantee more productive labour in the workforce, while casting less burden on taxes compared to maintaining the prisoner in recidivist stages. However, if the prisoner does not consent to being tied to the same industry upon release, skills certificates and work experience documentation would allow mobility in finding jobs in the market. To ensure there remains an incentive to continue to engage in such fields, the job placement supports and immediate promotions in said industries based on skills achieved in prison should be maintained. Such a voluntary participation system with incentives can encourage genuine encouragement post-release.

⁶³ Department of Prisons Prisoners' Welfare Fund Law, No. 18 of 1973.

Humane Standards and Prisoner Welfare

Regardless of the model presented for the development of prison industries, which may contribute toward rehabilitation, economic productivity, and institutional sustainability, it must be noted that such development must not occur at the expense of prisoners' welfare and human dignity. Therefore, any expansion of prison industries must be accompanied by comprehensive reforms relating to working conditions, healthcare, sanitation, safety standards, and institutional accountability. This is to make sure the compliance with both domestic legal obligations and international human rights standards, specially, UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (also known as 'Nelson Mandela Rules'),⁶⁴ UN Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non – custodial Measures for Women Offenders with their Commentary (also known as 'Bangkok Rules')⁶⁵ and United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (also known as 'The Beijing Rules').⁶⁶

The major issues that already exist within prison systems are mainly the unsafe working conditions, where working conditions are often poor, with unsafe, poorly ventilated environments, minimal safety equipment, inadequate training support, insufficient breaks, sometimes required to work throughout the week, and may even be made to work despite illness, and a lack of medical oversight. Incarcerated workers are often required to work in inherently dangerous conditions, including exposure to dangerous toxins on the job.⁶⁷

Further, prison inmates are more vulnerable to the spread of infectious diseases such as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), hepatitis B, hepatitis C, syphilis, gonorrhoea, chlamydia, and tuberculosis (TB)⁶⁸, and a significant proportion of inmates experience psychological stress are more prevalent among prisoners.⁶⁹ Furthermore, such health problems within the prisons increase

⁶⁴ UNGA Res 70/175 (17 December 2015) UN Doc A/RES/70/175.

⁶⁵ United Nations, *United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules)* (adopted 21 December 2010, UNGA Res 65/229).

⁶⁶ United Nations, *United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (the Beijing Rules)* (adopted 29 November 1985, UNGA Res 40/33).

⁶⁷ Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, *Prison Study by the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka* (2020) <<https://www.hrcsl.lk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Prison-Report-Final-2.pdf>> accessed 1 April 2026.

⁶⁸ Indika Wanninayake and Sumal Nandasena, Analysis of Prison Health Services in Relation to Strengthen the Service Delivery (2020) 21(1) *Sri Lankan Journal of Medical Administration* <<https://sljma.sljol.info/articles/5381/files/submission/proof/5381-1-19191-1-10-20211221.pdf>> accessed 10 February 2026.

⁶⁹ Wickramatilake CM and Others, 'General health characteristics, psychological stress of inmates and living environment of a main prison in Sri Lanka' (2023) 32(1) *Sri Lanka Journal of Medicine* <<https://sljm.sljol.info/articles/366/files/64ddb940b52b.pdf>> accessed 01 April 2026.

due to poor hygiene conditions in prisons. Although Sections 18, 62, 70, and 94 of the Prisons Ordinance⁷⁰ impose obligations relating to sanitation, hygiene, ventilation, food quality, and prisoner welfare, these safeguards are inadequately implemented in practice.⁷¹

In addition, in Sri Lanka, within the prison system, vulnerable populations like women, persons with disabilities, transgender individuals, elderly prisoners, and ethnic minorities face systematic discrimination, as confirmed by the 2024 Department of Prisons statistics and the 2021-2025 National Prison Reform Implementation Plan.⁷²

Considering these systemic shortcomings, substantial reforms are required to ensure that prison industries operate within humane and internationally accepted standards. Safe working conditions must be treated as a fundamental requirement within prison labour systems. This includes ensuring proper occupational safety measures, adequate protective equipment, regular health inspections, safe machinery, medical supervision, proper ventilation, and compliance with labour and workplace safety standards comparable to those applicable outside prisons. In addition, reforms should prioritise strengthening prison healthcare systems by filling existing medical vacancies, improving disease surveillance mechanisms, increasing access to mental healthcare and counselling services, establishing regular medical screening programmes, and improving sanitary conditions within prisons.⁷³

⁷⁰ Prisons Ordinance No.16 of 1877.

⁷¹ Centre for Policy Alternatives, *The Need for Prison Reforms in Sri Lanka* (2020) <<https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/BF-Prison-Reforms-May-2020-FINAL-DRAFT.-edited3.pdf>> accessed 10 February 2026.

⁷² Department of Prisons Sri Lanka, *A Right Based Correctional System for a Safer Society* (Prison Reform Implementation Plan 2021–2025, 2020) <<http://prisons.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Prison-reform-implementation-plan-2021-2025.pdf>> accessed 10 February 2026; The Committee for Protecting Rights of Prisoners, *Status of Prisoners in Sri Lanka: 2025 Annual Report* (CPRP, 2025) <<https://www.cprp.lk/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Book-final-print-final-1.pdf>> accessed 01 April 2026; Centre for Policy Alternatives, *The Need for Prison Reforms in Sri Lanka* (2020) <<https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/BF-Prison-Reforms-May-2020-FINAL-DRAFT.-edited3.pdf>> accessed 10 February 2026.

⁷³ Indika Wanninayake and Sumal Nandasena, Analysis of Prison Health Services in Relation to Strengthen the Service Delivery (2020) 21(1) *Sri Lankan Journal of Medical Administration* <<https://sljma.sljol.info/articles/5381/files/submission/proof/5381-1-19191-1-10-20211221.pdf>> accessed 10 February 2026; Wickramatilake CM and Others, ‘General health characteristics, psychological stress of inmates and living environment of a main prison in Sri Lanka’ (2023) 32(1) *Sri Lanka Journal of Medicine* <<https://sljm.sljol.info/articles/366/files/64ddb940b52b.pdf>> accessed 01 April 2026; Department of Prisons Sri Lanka, *A Right Based Correctional System for a Safer Society* (Prison Reform Implementation Plan 2021–2025, 2020) <<http://prisons.gov.lk/web/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Prison-reform-implementation-plan-2021-2025.pdf>> accessed 10 February 2026.

Ultimately, prison industries should function not merely as economic ventures, but as rehabilitation-oriented systems grounded in dignity, safety, humane treatment, and internationally recognised standards of prisoner welfare.

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