

ETHICAL AND PRACTICAL CHALLENGES OF SOCIAL WORKERS' ACTIVITY IN PENITENTIARY INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Penitentiary reforms increasingly prioritize convict resocialization, positioning social workers as pivotal agents in this process. However, practicing within closed institutions continuously forces a clash between professional values and punitive logic.

This article discusses the key ethical and practical challenges affecting social work quality and specialists' psychosocial well-being in Armenian penitentiaries. Utilizing a qualitative methodology, the study analyzed domestic and international legislation, internal institutional regulations, and ethical guidelines, supplemented by fieldwork involving direct observations and in-depth interviews. Through observation, the internal environment of penitentiary institutions and the specific dynamics of communication between social workers and convicts were examined. The in-depth interviews brought to light the internal ethical contradictions of social workers and their subjective perceptions of practical difficulties.

The findings indicate that social work in penitentiary institutions still operates within the collision zone between "custodial" and "rehabilitative" functions, which diminishes the effectiveness of psychosocial support. Practical challenges, specifically the limitation of professional autonomy, environmental resistance, and the absence of external supervision, contribute to emotional burnout and hinder the professional self-realization of social workers. The article proposes practical mechanisms aimed at implementing external supervisory frameworks and expanding professional autonomy.

Keywords: *Penitentiary institution, resocialization, professional ethics, ethical dilemma, professional autonomy, role conflict, emotional burnout, external supervision.*

INTRODUCTION

The core of contemporary penal policy in constitutional states is shifting from retributive justice to a rehabilitative model. This transition redefines the philosophy of punishment execution and highlights the pivotal role of social workers within correctional facilities. However, introducing social work into

carceral spaces creates structural and ethical contradictions, forcing specialists to operate within an inherent clash between professional values and punitive logic.

The relevance of this study stems from the perpetual conflict between professional ethics and institutional mandates. While social work is rooted in individual self-determination, absolute confidentiality, and humanism, the penitentiary system prioritizes public safety, security, and strict execution of sentences. This divergence forces social workers into a dual role, balancing therapeutic goals with public service mandates. Consequently, inmates frequently identify the social worker with the prison administration and the punitive apparatus, which inherently undermines the formation of a trust-based relationship.

Although recent strategic reforms in the Republic of Armenia aim to align the penitentiary system with international standards, the institutionalization of social work remains in a complex transitional phase. A significant gap persists between legislative declarations and practical implementation. While sector-specific regulations recognize professional autonomy, internal prison protocols often relegate social workers to auxiliary administrative roles. As a result, specialists are compelled to perform bureaucratic or custodial functions that contradict international social work principles and disrupt client rapport.

Grounded in these systemic tensions, this study identifies the ethical dilemmas and practical obstacles encountered by social workers in Armenian penitentiaries, subsequently proposing operational mechanisms to balance professional ethics with institutional requirements.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The transition of contemporary penitentiary systems from a punitive model to a rehabilitative paradigm has radically reshaped the role of the social worker, transforming them from a mere custodian into an agent of change. International experience indicates that in countries where the resocialization approach prevails, social services possess an expansive and institutionalized role. For instance, penal policy in Germany is anchored in the constitutional principle of resocialization, where the number of social workers exceeds that of other specialists, and they actively coordinate individual treatment plans for convicts as well as family-oriented interventions (Kuzmin, 2017). Similarly, the operation of the system in Scandinavian countries and Switzerland is grounded in the "principle of normality," which aims to bring prison conditions as close as possible to life in the outside community, thereby ensuring that released individuals do not recidivate (Kuznetsov, 2003). Within this framework, a robust systemic link exists between social work and probation services, as observed in the United Kingdom, where specialists are intrinsically involved in risk assessments and inter-agency cooperation (Healey, 1999). Consequently, the overarching global trend emphasizes the reinforcement of the institutional role of social work as a critical tool for recidivism prevention and public safety.

In this context, according to Albert Roberts, a social worker within the criminal justice system acts as a "clinical manager" whose task is to balance therapeutic assistance with supervision (Brownell &

Roberts, 2002). This necessitates the integration of several complementary roles, wherein the specialist simultaneously functions as a mediator maintaining the connection between the convict and the outside world, a counselor supporting psychosocial adaptation, an advocate for human rights, and an officer responsible for pre-release preparation. All these functions converge within case management—the "backbone" of social work—which ensures the holistic nature and continuity of the interventions implemented with the individual (Healey, 1999). Furthermore, this efficacy is heavily contingent upon the collaboration of a multidisciplinary team characterized by a clear delineation of professional boundaries. While the psychologist directs their clinical and therapeutic toolkit toward transforming the individual's inner world and resolving intrapersonal conflicts, the social worker concentrates on reshaping the social environment and mobilizing external resources.

The execution of these multifaceted functions within penitentiary institutions is a legally guaranteed process backed by the state. International baseline frameworks, such as the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (The Nelson Mandela Rules, 2015) and the European Prison Rules (2006), mandate that social workers must be included in institutional staff to focus on restoring social ties, while the Bangkok Rules (2010) emphasize gender sensitivity in the psychosocial rehabilitation of female convicts. In the Republic of Armenia (RA), the legal framework of this sphere is anchored in the Penal Code adopted in 2022 and the RA Law "On Social Assistance" (2014). However, a conceptual disconnect emerges here: while international standards view social work as a "right" of the convict aimed at mitigating the harmful effects of isolation, Armenian legislation perceives it more as a "means of punishment execution" and an obligation of the administration. This discrepancy generates a certain legal vacuum regarding the principles of professional ethics and the guarantee of the social worker's legal and professional autonomy.

As a consequence of these legal inconsistencies, social work practice within penitentiary institutions continuously faces resistance when measured against the ethical principles established by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the Armenian Association of Social Workers (AASW). First and foremost, the principle of respecting human dignity requires a person-centered approach in an environment where the individual is frequently perceived merely as a "criminal." Concurrently, promoting the beneficiary's right to self-determination is severely restricted within a system based on coercion and strict hierarchy, where participation in rehabilitative programs is often a mandatory prerequisite for early release. This gives rise to the dilemma of the "dual client," wherein the specialist experiences a conflict of loyalty between the state that remunerates them and the convict. Another ethical tension manifests at the intersection of maintaining confidentiality and satisfying public safety mandates. Additionally, specialists face the constant risk of boundary violations, as they can either become susceptible to manipulation by convicts or over-identify with the system, thereby devolving into a "punitive" link. These dilemmas extend to peer relationships as well; when witnessing ethical violations or unlawful treatment of beneficiaries by other staff members, the social worker is forced to

choose between peer solidarity and their primary obligation to protect the beneficiary's rights (IFSW, 2018).

These ethical complexities are further compounded by structural and practical barriers, specifically resource scarcity, a lack of developmental programs, and a severe disproportion between the number of social workers and inmates. The current statistical reality of the penitentiary system in the Republic of Armenia serves as the critical baseline upon which the fundamental issues of social work practice are anchored. Currently, the responsibility for the resocialization of approximately 1,441 remanded individuals and 1,539 sentenced convicts held in the 9 operating penitentiary institutions of the RA is assigned to the departments of social, psychological, and legal work; however, the total number of social workers across all 9 institutions is a mere 10. Specifically, the "Vardashen" and "Abovyan" penitentiary institutions employ only one social worker each (Penitentiary Service Statistics, 2026). From the standpoint of professional efficacy, it is alarming that the average workload of a single social worker frequently exceeds 70 to 100 beneficiaries, whereas an optimal ratio of 1/50 (one specialist per 50 inmates) is accepted in international practice (European Prison Rules, 2006). This actual local reality in Armenian penitentiaries renders in-depth case management physically impossible.

In this situation, social workers are forced to navigate between two opposing poles: professional ethics (freedom, confidentiality) and institutional control (discipline, security). This perpetual role conflict spawn's profound ethical dilemmas and practical obstacles that not only diminish the successful organization of the resocialization process but also inevitably lead to emotional and professional burnout among specialists. Consequently, the synthesis of theoretical, legal, and statistical analyses leads to the conclusion that the incompatibility of punitive and rehabilitative paradigms, the ambiguity of professional mandates, and institutional resistance diminish the potential of the social worker as an agent of positive change, ultimately reducing them to a mere servant of the system.

METHODOLOGY

The primary objective of this study is to identify and analyze the ethical and practical challenges encountered by social workers within the "Abovyan" and "Vardashen" penitentiary institutions in the Republic of Armenia, subsequently proposing operational pathways for their resolution. To achieve this objective, the study addresses several interconnected research tasks:

- examining the legal and operational contradictions between the professional code of ethics and internal penitentiary regulations;
- exploring the practical difficulties stemming from resource constraints and the unique features of the carceral environment;
- assessing the dynamics of interprofessional collaboration alongside the perceptions of the social worker's role held by both the administration and inmates;
- and investigating the impact of the physical and psychological environment on specialist-inmate communication.

To capture the subjective depth of social workers' lived experiences and ethical tribulations within closed institutions, this study employs a qualitative research methodology. Empirical data were gathered utilizing two primary methods:

Table 1.

Research Methods	
in-depth interviews	The in-depth interviews were designed with open-ended, exploratory questions to extract nuanced individual narratives, perceptions, and systemic barriers from social workers and allied professionals, including psychologists, lawyers, and security personnel.
structured observation.	the structured observation focused on the professional workspace and the conditions of interaction with beneficiaries. This method allowed for the direct documentation of behavioral models, communication barriers, and latent ethical tensions emerging from the friction between professional mandates and institutional protocols.

Sampling and Research Sites. Purposive sampling was utilized to select two distinctly different research sites to leverage comparative advantages based on inmate demographics:

- The "*Abovyan*" *penitentiary* is the sole institution in Armenia housing female inmates, thereby allowing an exploration of social work complexities within highly specific layers of vulnerability; ethically, the dilemmas here predominantly manifest as psychological-emotional, such as managing confidentiality amid complex family dynamics.
- The "*Vardashen*" *penitentiary* detains former public officials, military personnel, and foreign nationals—a cohort requiring advanced professional boundaries and specialized skills; consequently, the ethical challenges here are structurally and legally driven, centered on maintaining professional distance with formerly high-ranking individuals.

Sample Composition and Framework. The interview sample comprised 3 social workers and 8 allied specialists (including psychologists, lawyers, security officers, and deputy heads of institutions) from the respective Social, Psychological, and Legal Work Departments. *The inclusion criterion required a minimum of one year of professional experience in the penitentiary sector.* This sample size aligns with the epistemological standards of qualitative inquiry, which prioritizes rich, contextualized depth over statistical generalization across the broader penal system.

Concurrently, the observational sampling was situational and spatial, focusing on carceral zones with the highest probability of ethical and practical friction. A total of 6 comprehensive observation sessions were conducted during direct social worker-inmate interactions, providing an empirical triangulation of the narrative data. The observation mapping targeted social situations across three dimensions:

- locations (social workers' offices, common activity halls, checkpoints, and corridors),
- actors (social workers, allied staff, and inmates),
- and actions (communication styles, group interactions, and interprofessional dynamics).

Data Analysis. To analyze the qualitative data gathered from in-depth interviews and structured observation field notes, this study employed reflexive Thematic Analysis, following the six-phase framework established by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). This iterative analytic process involved:

Data familiarization: Repeated reading of the transcribed verbatim interview audio recordings and observation protocols to immerse in the contextual depth;

Initial code generation: Systematic line-by-line open coding of the transcripts to identify meaningful units, ethical dilemmas, and practical constraints;

Searching for themes: Collapsing and grouping initial codes into broader potential themes aligning with the study's core research tasks (e.g., administrative vs. ethical friction, boundary maintenance, environmental communication barriers);

Reviewing themes: Refining and checking themes against the entire dataset to ensure semantic and latent consistency, as well as empirical alignment with observational findings;

Defining and naming themes: Conceptualizing the core essence and specific nuances of each theme;

Producing the report: Integrating contextual narrative quotes from respondents with observational triangulation to construct a coherent, evidence-based qualitative synthesis.

Audio data were fully transcribed, and cross-methodological triangulation (comparing interview accounts with situational observation field notes) was utilized to enhance the analytical trustworthiness, credibility, and rigor of the qualitative findings.

RESULTS

To identify the ethical and practical challenges of social work in Armenian penitentiaries, empirical data gathered through structured observations and in-depth interviews across the "Abovyan" and "Vardashen" facilities were synthesized around four primary thematic axes:

1. EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Empirical findings reveal a sharp contrast in professional self-perception and service delivery based on the specialists' foundational educational background.

- Academic Preparation vs. Clerical Drift: At "Vardashen" penitentiary, social workers with formal social work degrees successfully maintained professional boundaries and therapeutic registers. Conversely, at "Abovyan" penitentiary, where social work functions were performed by staff lacking foundational professional education (having completed only short-term training), interactions with convicts remained transactional, bureaucratic, and strictly administrative.

- Role Perception by Beneficiaries: Observations at "Abovyan" indicated that convicts failed to differentiate the specific role of the social worker from other administrative staff. As an institutional

lawyer at "Abovyan" noted: "They [the convicts] do not differentiate the role boundaries of the social worker."

Thus, foundational professional education acts as the primary determinant of professional identity in carceral settings. Without it, social work practice in Armenian penitentiaries experiences a systemic regression into administrative paperwork and transactional service delivery.

2. PRACTITIONER-BENEFICIARY COMMUNICATION DYNAMICS AND ETHICS

Observational and interview data demonstrated distinct operational atmospheres in practitioner-beneficiary interactions across the two institutions:

- "Vardashen" Penitentiary (Former Officials/Foreigners): Structured observations during group and individual sessions revealed an environment of psychological safety and high trust. Social workers utilized an empathetic, calm register, prioritizing inmate self-expression and structured self-reflection. Security officers displayed non-interfering, respectful behavior during sessions. As inmates at "Vardashen" expressed: "The social worker is one of the few specialists we trust unconditionally." "Individual counseling helps me the most. When I feel I can no longer endure the oppressive conditions of prison, the social worker comes to my aid."

- Managing Confidentiality and Bias: Experienced specialists reported navigating confidentiality limits through upfront transparency and "informed consent" during initial intakes. Regarding non-discrimination, practitioners noted overcoming initial personal biases through experience. As one social worker reflected: "When I was first employed, I had to struggle against my own biases because I found it difficult to provide professional support to individuals who had committed certain types of crimes. Today, I consider myself much more skilled and professional in this regard."

Consequently, psychological safety and beneficiary trust are not contingent on physical conditions alone, but are established through procedural transparency (informed consent) and empathetic communication, effectively neutralizing the inherent coercive pressure of the carceral environment.

3. INTERPROFESSIONAL COLLABORATION AND PERCEPTIONS

Data gathered from allied specialists (psychologists, lawyers, security staff, and administration) highlighted divergent interprofessional perceptions:

- The Psychologist's Perspective: At "Abovyan", the psychologist reported a total lack of autonomy in the social worker's practice, describing compliant behavior under administrative direction: "The social worker does not voice an independent opinion; they agree with and submit to the head of the department and the institutional leadership without demonstrating the initiative to make independent decisions." Conversely, at "Vardashen", close multidisciplinary collaboration was observed, where the psychologist actively utilized the social worker's observations to compile inmate psychosocial profiles.

- **The Lawyer's Perspective:** Across both facilities, legal personnel consistently reduced the social worker's mandate to technical-social administration (e.g., passport processing, pensions, divorce proceedings, employment documents).

- **Security and Management Perspectives:** Security staff across both sites reported constructive, non-adversarial working relations. The Deputy Head of "Vardashen" acknowledged the social worker as a key actor in resocialization, emphasizing the urgent need to expand staff numbers and lower specialist-to-inmate ratios.

Thus, interprofessional dynamic is asymmetric: while security staff demonstrate high operational acceptance, legal personnel exhibit institutional reductionism, posing a major practical barrier to the recognition of social work as a transformative rehabilitative discipline.

4. STRUCTURAL OVERLOAD AND SYSTEMIC CONSTRAINTS

Statistical and narrative data confirm severe operational bottlenecks:

- **Workload Ratios:** Currently, only 10 social workers are employed across Armenia's 9 operating penitentiary institutions to serve approximately 2,980 inmates (~1,441 remanded and 1,539 sentenced). At "Vardashen" and "Abovyan", only one social worker is assigned per institution, resulting in caseloads of 70 to 100+ beneficiaries per specialist.

- **Administrative Burden:** Social workers across both institutions emphasized that heavy bureaucratic paperwork restricts their time for substantive rehabilitative work. As a social worker at "Vardashen" stated: "The institution itself encourages the organization of events, but the heavy workload does not always allow us to fully realize these initiatives."

Thus, extreme practitioner-to-beneficiary disproportions convert social work from a proactive, therapeutic case management model into a reactive, crisis-response mechanism.

DISCUSSION

The empirical findings of this study offer critical insights into the operational reality of penal social work in Armenia, demonstrating how structural constraints, legal vacuums, and educational gaps intersect to influence professional ethics and practice.

1. CONCEPTUALIZING "BUREAUCRATIC DRIFT" IN TRANSITIONAL CARCERAL CONTEXTS

The empirical divergence observed between "Vardashen" and "Abovyan" validates the theoretical premise that foundational social work education is the primary anchor of professional identity. In settings where formal social work training is absent, penal social work undergoes a clear "Bureaucratic Drift"—a phenomenon where transformative psychosocial interventions erode into purely clerical, administrative support. While international frameworks (such as the UN Nelson Mandela Rules and European Prison

Rules) define social work as a comprehensive rehabilitative process centered on case management (Healey, 1999; Roberts & Brownell, 2002), Armenian practice frequently reduces specialists to social administrators. This reductionism is reinforced by institutional lawyers who fail to perceive the therapeutic potential of social work, viewing specialists merely as facilitators of civil documentation.

2. DE-CONSTRUCTING THE SECURITY VS. CONFIDENTIALITY DICHOTOMY

A prominent theme in Western literature on correctional social work is the chronic, adversarial friction between security mandates (custodial logic) and professional ethics (rehabilitative logic). However, counter to this assumption, empirical findings from Armenian penitentiaries demonstrate a non-adversarial, collaborative dynamic between security personnel and social workers.

Rather than experiencing acute ethical breaches or security interference, social workers successfully resolve the "security vs. confidentiality" dichotomy through the proactive application of informed consent and procedural transparency. By setting clear boundary limits during initial intakes, specialists maintain inmate trust without compromising institutional safety. Furthermore, the findings reveal that supervisory and administrative duties assigned to social workers (e.g., compiling behavioral evaluations) do not inherently disrupt client rapport or cause ethical paralysis, provided the specialist possesses the clinical competence to frame these requirements transparently.

3. INSTITUTIONAL VACUUM, AUTONOMY, AND THE "ABSENCE OF CODIFIED RESTRICTIONS"

The study reveals a dual structural challenge: an alarming quantitative shortage (~1 specialist per 100+ inmates, compared to the international standard of 1:50) and a legal vacuum regarding professional social work autonomy within the RA Penitentiary Code.

However, as highlighted by institutional management, the "absence of codified restrictions" in Armenian law can be re-conceptualized not merely as a limitation, but as an operational window for professional autonomy. In the absence of rigid statutory boundaries, qualified social workers can leverage creative methodology, clinical discretion, and flexible interventions. Nevertheless, relying solely on individual practitioner resilience is unsustainable; without legislative codification of professional privilege, institutionalized external supervision, and systemic staff expansion, social workers remain highly vulnerable to emotional burnout and systemic co-optation by the punitive apparatus.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has two primary limitations. First, the empirical research was restricted to two specific penitentiary institutions in the Republic of Armenia ("Vardashen" and "Abovyan"). Consequently, the findings regarding practitioner-beneficiary dynamics and interprofessional challenges may not be fully generalizable to the entire correctional system of the country or to international contexts with different

legislative and institutional frameworks. Second, given the qualitative nature of the study, which relied on in-depth interviews and structured observations, the emphasis was placed on obtaining rich, contextualized insights rather than statistically representative quantitative data. Future research incorporating larger, mixed-method designs across a broader range of correctional facilities would be beneficial to validate and expand upon these findings.

CONCLUSIONS AND PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATION

At the international level, the prevailing paradigm emphasizes the strengthening of the institutional role of social work as a vital mechanism for recidivism prevention and public safety. Within the correctional framework, the social worker represents a pivotal link. While other departments within penitentiary institutions are primarily oriented toward maintaining institutional security and internal discipline, the core mission of the social worker is centered on preserving and restoring the social functioning and viability of the convict population.

While international frameworks position the social worker as a vital agent for recidivism prevention, the practical efficacy of social work in the observed Armenian penitentiaries remains constrained by structural limitations. These factors create a distinct gap between the professional mission of social workers and their practical capabilities.

Synthesizing the results of the theoretical analysis and empirical research (comprising in-depth interviews and structured observations) allows for the formulation of the following key conclusions:

Education Anchors Identity: Foundational professional education serves as the bedrock of a social worker's professional identity. The case of the "Vardashen" penitentiary demonstrated that adequate academic preparation enables specialists to maintain therapeutic boundaries. Conversely, the lack of foundational education (as observed in the "Abovyan" penitentiary) leads to a constriction of the professional role, reducing it to purely administrative-technical functions.

Resolving the Security-Confidentiality Dichotomy: The systemic "security vs. confidentiality" tension inherent to closed environments is resolved not by compromising professional principles, but through strategies of transparency and "informed consent." Experienced practitioners succeed in fostering an atmosphere of trust by clarifying the parameters and limitations of confidentiality at the very onset of their engagement with beneficiaries.

Devaluation of the Social Worker's Role: The analysis validated a tendency to devalue the role of the social worker, particularly among legal staff, who often equate the profession with mere administrative paperwork. This indicates that a comprehensive culture of multidisciplinary teamwork—wherein the social worker is recognized as an equal partner and agent in the resocialization process—has yet to be fully institutionalized within the studied facilities.

Supervisory Functions and Professional Ethics: The research revealed that, contrary to the initial hypothesis, the supervisory and control functions assigned to social workers by the penitentiary administration (such as compiling behavior reports and addressing disciplinary matters) do not

fundamentally conflict with professional ethics or the value system of a "helping professional," nor do they disrupt the collaborative atmosphere established with convicts. The core issue is not the function itself, but the resulting workload. This adaptation can be attributed to the internalization of systemic demands by the specialists or the development of professional defense mechanisms in practice.

Disproportionate Practitioner-to-beneficiary ratio: A critical operational challenge identified is the severe quantitative discrepancy between specialists and beneficiaries (often exceeding 1 specialist per 100+ beneficiaries). This objectively compromises the quality of social work, rendering long-term therapeutic interventions unfeasible and restricting the specialist to the reactive role of a "crisis responder."

Practical Recommendations Based directly on the empirical findings and operational challenges identified in the studied penitentiaries, the following evidence-based recommendations are proposed:

1. *Institutionalization of Professional Supervision.* To mitigate practitioner burnout and role erosion resulting from high-stress casework, the Ministry of Justice should establish systematic, external professional supervision mechanisms. Rather than relying solely on administrative oversight, external clinical supervision should be integrated into standard practice to provide social workers with independent professional support, case debriefing, and guidance on complex ethical dilemmas.

2. *Implementation of Targeted Capacity-Building Programs.* Addressing the observed professional role ambiguity and friction with allied specialists requires structured, continuous training:

- **Ethical Dilemma Resolution.** The Penitentiary Service, in collaboration with academic institutions, should implement specialized training modules focused on practical strategies for balancing dual "supportive" and "supervisory" responsibilities in carceral environments.
- **Interprofessional Integration.** To dismantle the documented devaluation of social work by legal staff, mandatory joint orientation workshops should be conducted for multidisciplinary prison teams (security, legal, and social workers) to establish a shared understanding of social work's specific role in resocialization.

3. *Legislative Clarification and Role Differentiation.* To eliminate the legal vulnerabilities that currently force practitioners to rely solely on personal discretion, policy adjustments are required at the statutory level:

- **Functional Demarcation.** Amendments should be introduced to internal regulations and the Law "On Penitentiary Service" to clearly delineate the core duties of social workers, reducing secondary administrative tasks that erode beneficiary trust.
- **Codification of Professional Privilege.** The RA Penitentiary Code should be amended to explicitly define "privileged communication" for prison social workers. Establishing a legally defined, narrow threshold for mandatory disclosure will safeguard therapeutic confidentiality while maintaining necessary institutional security bounds.

4. *Staff Expansion and Workload Optimization.* To bridge the critical gap between professional standards and daily practice—where caseloads frequently exceed 1:100+—the Ministry of Finance and

the Ministry of Justice should allocate resources for a phased expansion of social work positions. Phasing staffing levels toward international benchmarks (such as the 1:50 specialist-to-beneficiary ratio recommended by European Prison Rules) will allow social workers to transition from reactive crisis management to structured individual and group rehabilitative programs.

Scientific Novelty of the Study:

First Empirical Comparative Analysis: This study provides one of the first empirical, multi-method qualitative inquiries (combining in-depth interviews and structured observation) into penal social work in Armenia, contrasting how inmate demographics at "Abovyan" (female inmates) and "Vardashen" (former officials/foreigners) condition ethical dilemmas and boundary maintenance.

Conceptualization of "Bureaucratic Drift" in Post-Soviet Carceral Contexts: The research demonstrates that the absence of formal social work education combined with a legal vacuum triggers "role erosion," shifting penal social work from a transformative, psychosocial intervention into a purely administrative-clerical service.

Re-evaluating the Ethics-Security Nexus: Counter to Western literature highlighting chronic conflict between security staff and social workers, this study identifies a non-adversarial, constructive dynamic in Armenian penitentiaries, where ethical confidentiality is successfully maintained through transparent informed consent frameworks.

Empirical Grounding for Structural Reform: The study empirically identifies the severe structural disparity in specialist-to-inmate ratios (~1:300 in Armenia vs. international 1:30 standards), providing a concrete evidence base for legislative clarity, institutional autonomy, and mandatory professional supervision in penal social work.

The findings and practical recommendations of this study hold significant value for ongoing penitentiary reforms and the institutionalization of social work in Armenia. The identified patterns and dynamics can serve as a fundamental guide for policymakers, legislative bodies, and the professional community, contributing to the enhancement of both the legal and practical foundations of this professional activity.

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