

Women in Prison: Work, Education & Vocational Training

This brief is based on findings from the *Women's Pathways to Prison* project conducted by the Gender, Health and Justice Research Unit, University of Cape Town (2012). The *Pathways Project* was one of the first in-depth, ethnographic studies on incarcerated women in South Africa. Through an innovative, multi-method project design, the *Pathways Project* explored the reasons why women come into conflict with the law and end up in prison. Moving beyond classical criminological studies on prison – where positivist survey methods still dominate – our methods culminated in 55 in-depth narratives of incarcerated women. The 'theoretical aim' of the project was to highlight the distinctive nature of female criminality, thereby shifting attention from an all-male focus on crime that has characterised most of South African criminology and prisons research. The study aimed to generate new knowledge around women, crime and incarceration and to contribute to the formulation of more effective and appropriate correctional policies that take into account the particular context that shapes female criminality and the specific factors that inform women's experiences of incarceration.

Although the intention of our research was not to monitor, document or explore conditions of imprisonment in South Africa, it did explore the way in which women *experienced* imprisonment. When probing issues of daily life inside and how imprisonment has impacted them it was revealed that opportunities for and access to education, training and work programmes during incarceration is a central concern for women in prison.

The Importance of Education, Work and Vocational Training in Correctional Centres

Education, work and vocational training in state prisons are fundamental to the wellbeing, rehabilitation and social reintegration of prisoners. Productive work is integral to an individual's sense of self-worth and has been shown to contribute to general physical and mental health. The range and type of activities available to prisoners should enable them to become productive and law abiding members of society after release by providing them with basic life skills, improving their education, and increasing their job skills and thus employment opportunities. Research indicates that steady employment following release is one of the most important factors that prevent recidivism, together with strong family ties and support. One factor that affects the decision of an ex-offender to recidivate or to desist from crime is the incentives the person faces from job market participation. Research suggests that re-entry programs that raise the expected rewards from legitimate work reduce recidivism and increase employability (De Viggiani, 2007). Having a gainful job lessens the chances of reoffending following release from prison, or at least lengthens the period

before the re-offence (Tripodi, Kim and Bender, 2010), especially among those with higher wages and higher quality jobs (Sampson and Laub, 1997).

The UNODC has noted that prison authorities can contribute significantly to the social integration of women prisoners by providing and facilitating adequate and equal opportunities for vocational training in prisons that are aimed at finding gainful employment upon release (UNODC, 2008). Education, vocational training and work in prison are critical for female prisoners, especially in South Africa, where women are likely to have suffered gender-based discrimination and violence prior to imprisonment. Women are less likely to have been employed than men (Statistics South Africa, 2011), and our findings suggest that many women become involved in criminal activity due to economic pressure (55% of these women were motivated *primarily* by economic reasons). Turning to crime because of the need to provide for their children, or even extended families, was a common feature of female offending. So too were efforts to emancipate themselves from abusive partners, spouses or parents.

The Regulatory Framework

The *United Nations (UN) Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners* (hereafter referred to as the *Standard Minimum Rules*)¹, is an international guideline for the treatment of persons held in prisons and other forms of custody.² In terms of prison work, the Standard Minimum Rules aim to ensure that prisoners are provided with sufficient, non-exploitative and fairly remunerated work. It states that prison work should be constructive, should prepare prisoners for further education or employment upon release, and, where possible, should help support the families of prisoners or create a savings base for the future (s. 71- 76). Similarly, the *Kampala Declaration on Prison Conditions in Africa* states that “prisoners should be given access to education and skills training in order to make it easier for them to reintegrate into society after their release” (s. 7).³ In terms of education, the *Standard Minimum Rules* provide that all prisoners capable of profiting from education should receive relevant education, and that basic literacy should be compulsory, especially for youth. Consistent with the goal of reintegration, such education should be compatible with the educational system of the country so that after release offenders may easily continue their education.

These international guidelines have been entrenched in section 40(1) of the *Correctional Services Act* (1998) which provides that: (a) sufficient work must as far as is practicable be provided to keep sentenced offenders active for a normal working day and a sentenced offender may be compelled to do such work; and (b) such work must as far as is practicable be aimed at providing such offenders with skills in order to be gainfully employed in society on release. DCS delineates its policy on education, training and work in more detail in its *White Paper on Corrections* in South Africa (2005). As part of its ‘needs-

¹ Adopted on 30 August 1955 by the United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders, held at Geneva, and approved by the Economic and Social Council in resolutions of 31 July 1957 and 13 May 1977.

² These rules have also been supplemented by the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Means for Women Offenders (known as the Bangkok Rules) which address the specific needs and characteristics of women in prison, however, specific provisions for women’s education, vocational training and work opportunities are noticeably lacking in this document.

³ *International Seminar on Prison Conditions in Africa, held at Kampala from 19 to 21 September 1996*. Economic and Social Council Resolution 1997/36, annex.

based approach to rehabilitation,’ DCS has identified “education and training”, “productive work” and increasing “employability” as key components of its efforts to “correct” offending behaviours and to “develop” offenders’ potential to improve their opportunities upon release (p. 67-68). The White Paper further emphasises (in section 9.10.2) that the work and training activities provided by DCS “should not entrench gender and racial stereotypes, and should be geared to empowering all offenders [...]” and that in order to increase employability after incarceration, and perhaps decrease some of the stigma attached to having been an offender, eligible inmates should receive certificates to document their work experience.

In terms of education, the *Correctional Services Act* (1998) states that DCS must provide access to as full a range of programmes and activities as is necessary to meet the educational and training needs of sentenced offenders, and compels children and illiterate adults to participate in basic education (s. 41[1]). The Act also mandates in terms of section 41(7) that programmes “must be responsive to special needs of women and they must ensure that women are not disadvantaged.” The White Paper on Corrections also acknowledges that incarceration should not curtail an individual’s basic right to education, and that in line with international standards, DCS aims to provide prisoners with literacy and basic adult education to the same level as is available in the education system of society at large, so as to ensure continuity in the event of release (section 9.9).

Overview on Work in Prison

In 1998 the South African Human Rights Commission argued that:

There are simply not enough work opportunities created in terms of existing prison industry to generate meaningful skills-transfer to a sufficiently large number of prisoners. Prison industry, if properly utilised, cannot only play a positive role in rehabilitation, but can also contribute to the long-term financial wellbeing of the institution. It can also provide prisoners with an opportunity of accumulating money through work that may assist them upon their release (SAHRC, 1998, p. 25).

Our experience of working within the prison system illustrated that the failure to provide vocational and educational training opportunities for prisoners is not due to a general lack of will on the part of prison management

or members, but instead to severely constrained institutional resources, both in terms of sufficient staff to oversee these activities as well as the skills and materials that are required for certain classes and activities. While resource constraints affect all South African prisoners, women seem to be even further disadvantaged as they are afforded even fewer educational and training opportunities than their male counterparts. Our observations comport with data from other contexts that find that women inmates often suffer a lack of education and work opportunities as a result of investment in education and training being concentrated in the larger male prison population. Furthermore, as smaller populations of women are often housed in the annexes of male prisons, they are deemed too few to warrant any major investment; and the lack of childcare facilities in prisons often impedes women with young children from accessing prison activities (UNODC, 2008).

As DCS only provides information about the activities of its general prisoner population it is difficult to make specific inferences about women's participation in educational and vocational activities (SAHRC, 1998). Currently, DCS facilities only provide training to sentenced prisoners (Nhlapo, 2007) and only about 28% of inmates have work opportunities (DA, 2009). However, based on current DCS statistics, only 2 096 offenders were employed on various correctional centre farms, measured against the total number of sentenced offenders, 112 467 (DCS, 2011).⁴ This is less than 2% of the total sentenced prison population, and given the prevalent gender division of labour within the prison system, it is likely that men dominate such opportunities to work outside. The vast majority of prisoners are engaged in menial and low-skilled work within prisons, and occasionally by outside employers (DCS, 2011). Most work in prison kitchens, laundries, gardens and as cleaners; whilst others work in sewing and carpentry workshops [WDCS1, 2011]. However, what proportion of the population these 'in-house' workers constitute, and how frequently they work, is uncertain.

In the provision of education, DCS seems to fair better, reporting in 2011 that 69.8% of eligible prisoners are registered in Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) programmes. But only 12% of those eligible for Further Education Training (FET) are registered in the relevant

⁴ Total population is 162 162, where the total number of awaiting trial detainees is 49 695, and the total number of sentenced offenders is 112 467.

training programmes (DCS, 2011). Unsentenced offenders and persons awaiting trial are not entitled to educational (or rehabilitative) services provided by the DCS, unless such a person is of compulsory school-going age (15 years and younger) (Muntingh, 2010).

Work Vocational and Education Programmes for Women in Pollsmoor and Worcester Female Correctional Centres

The women in our study reported their participation in a number of rehabilitative, educational and work programmes. The distinction between 'work', 'rehabilitation' and 'recreation' is difficult to make in the women's prison system. Workshops – sewing, for instance – were variously referred to as 'work' and 'rehabilitation' by both prisoners and DCS members. Thus "workshops" were considered both "shops for work" as well as "skills workshops" where discipline and technical skills are developed. On the whole, the programme of activities for sentenced inmates at these two women's prisons makes little distinction between education, skill/vocation training, productive work, rehabilitation and recreation. All constructive day time activities are considered "developmental" and are equally valued (DCS, 2005, p.37). However, given the different goals of skills/vocational training (as preparation for future employment and productive work) and rehabilitation (as ameliorative processes to alleviate causes of transgression and prevent further criminality) (DCS, 2005), this distinction seems significant. Whilst these different programmes and underlying motivations are not mutually exclusive, they need to be differentiated in order to ensure that individual prisoners have access to the range of opportunities that best benefits them.

(a) Work

Forty six women in our sample (84%) reported working in prison. The types of work varied greatly, including: needlework and textiles; food preparation; cleaning; library work; office work; peer education and counselling; laundry; crèche care (at Pollsmoor, where some inmates' young children live with them); hairdressing; and agriculture. Work in prison is remunerated with between R2 to R5 a day – depending on the type of work. Whilst we do not have records of the earnings at Pollsmoor prison, at Worcester inmates can earn R2.60 a day for sewing denim in prison workshop, which averages out to about R49 per month. The highest paid inmates earn R99 per month in

the workshop. They have to work every day (Monday to Friday) to get paid.

Unfortunately, women prisoners are still subject to highly gendered regimes when it comes to opportunities for work in prison. As is typical elsewhere too (Wahidin, 2004), fewer educational and training opportunities exist for women than for men, and women are more likely to have to perform domestic-related or conventionally 'female' activities. Furthermore, opportunities for work outside of prison, in agriculture for instance, are available almost entirely to men, highlighting the discriminatory nature of the system. Not much unlike other contexts, educational programmes still focus on activities traditionally thought to be 'women's work'. This is probably an attempt to promote 'feminine' behaviour (Bosworth, 1996). Domestic activities such as cleaning, and salon work reinforce sexist notions that women are incapable of competing with men in the workplace (Wahidin, 2004).

Wahidin (2004) makes the valid point that while the skills taught to men are generally framed in terms of preparation for employment on release – training as a mechanic, gardener, or carpenter – those taught to women rarely are. Consider that much of the in-house work at Worcester and Pollsmoor consisted of women sewing denim. This is a practical and efficient way to manufacture prison uniforms, occupy women in productive labour and for them to earn a small income. However, given the continued decline of the South African textile industry, this is unlikely to be a fruitful avenue for post-release employment. Once more, there is little distinction between constructive work, that is a beneficial way to occupy prisoner's time, and vocational training that prepares them for work outside.

The lack of appropriate work opportunities is especially difficult for women who have the capacity to achieve professional success in the workplace, or who were professionally successful before entering prison, as they feel that time spent in prison is wasted time, intensifying "the loss of self, individuality, [and] affirmation by others" that some women prisoners already experience (Wahidin, 2004, p.155). Further, the lack of work experience in women's prisons reinforces women's dependency on men; once released they may be unable to find gainful employment, and in many cases will have to resort to depending on men for survival. This is obviously concerning when one takes the high levels of abuse histories of incarcerated women into account (our study

found that 67% of women had experienced physical or sexual abuse in their adulthood).

Of those women who do work in prison, 28 (61%) said that they were happy with the work they were doing, and 18 (39%) said they would prefer to do something else. Although many women said that they were happy with the work this may reflect that they are glad to have any constructive activities at all. As the women say – "they're a way to keep busy," and for some women they provide a stable source of income that they had not had access to outside of prison. This apparent satisfaction may reflect a lack of information about what the job market is in fact like, and that skills accrued in prison, for instance flower arranging, may not actually translate into real job opportunities on release.

(b) Vocational and Skills Training

The gendered nature of activities for women prisoners is also evident in the vocational programmes available to them. For instance, "hairdressing" is a key vocational training programme in the women's section, although opportunities to do welding and carpentry have also been made available. While there is no question that a wide range of 'courses' are offered, many of these tend to be once off, *ad hoc* and dependent on the goodwill of external organisations and agencies.

Women reported that they would like to be offered courses on small business development, financial management and bookkeeping, entrepreneurship, catering, car mechanics, carpentry, bricklaying, photography, and interior decorating, among other activities. Longer-term prisoners, in particular, felt that there are too few opportunities for them. They specifically emphasised learning more practical skills – those that could be used in the contemporary outside world – as well as a desire for more activities like arts and crafts and music as a creative outlet and to keep them busy. Women prisoners were also keen to engage in community work and, although impractical from a security perspective, asked if it would be possible for them to do volunteer work outside of the prison (like painting a school or planting a community garden). They felt that working outside of the prison would not only be enjoyable, but a way for them to contribute to society in a proactive and meaningful way. Community work would also be a way in which they could slowly (and positively) integrate into community life upon release.

Pre-release programmes were also considered inadequate as they did not cover the wide range of women's needs when considering their re-entry into "the modern world." Knowledge about technology was high on the agenda for incarcerated women, but knowledge about the basics in "surviving out there" was also of great importance: how to open a bank account, how to use an ATM, how to get a cell phone contract, what to put in a resume or applying for a job with "missing years", how to apply for social grants and seek other support services, how to secure housing and handle rental contracts, and more generally, what to expect when (re)entering the job market. Here too, an effort to foster empowerment and independence amongst women prisoners is vital, and should be reflected in vocational and practical skills-development opportunities, so as to decrease the likelihood of women returning to the disempowering or abusive contexts from which many have come, and which have contributed to their involvement in crime.

(c) Formal Education

Education is free for inmates up to Grade 10. This goes a little beyond what is prescribed in the *South African Schools Act of 1996*, which makes education compulsory for all South Africans from the age of seven, or Grade 1, to age 15, or the completion of Grade 9. After Grade 10, inmates must enrol in independent correspondence colleges and universities to study further and must pay for it themselves. Both prisons have a working library. However, it was reported that visits to the libraries are infrequent, perhaps twice a month or when a DCS member is available and willing to take them. Even attempts to self-educate are blocked by disinterested members and the lack of updated resources and facilities. Prisoners reported that they were often reliant on peer educators for lessons, and where such inmates were not available, this disrupted the class schedule.

Completing or furthering education while in prison was important to some of the women, both as a way to keep busy, and because they had been unable to do so outside. One prisoner relayed how she had dropped out of school in Grade 8 because her home life was too disruptive for her to study, but managed to complete her National Senior Certificate (NSC) while in prison.

Another prisoner expressed her appreciation for the skills she had learned in the more practical programmes, like computer literacy and sewing.

Recommendations:

- Education, work and vocational training should be encouraged for every sentenced offender, so long as she is able, such that prisoners can see incarceration as a learning experience and not 'lost' time.
- The achievement of 69.8% enrolment for basic literacy training (ABET) for eligible offenders is commendable. In light of the *Correctional Services Act (s.41(1))*, however, which provides that such education is compulsory for illiterate adults, efforts should be made to extend such education to all eligible prisoners. Existing barriers and deterrents to prisoner participation should be investigated and addressed. DCS should ensure that ABET is available for all prisoners, regardless of when they are incarcerated, and proper support should be available to ensure that prisoners are able to successfully complete this programme. Teachers for this programme should be provided by DCS and should not rely upon the availability of qualified inmates as instructors.
- More significantly, DCS should ensure that further education and training (FET) is available for those women who wish to participate and that adequate resources and support are available for this purpose. This is particularly critical for young prisoners and those with medium and long sentences.
- A range of work and skills training activities should be made available to women prisoners. Work and skills, however, should not be as 'gendered' as they currently are. While some prisoners enjoy vocational pursuits such as sewing and hairdressing, others have emphasised the need to develop skills in less gendered areas, such as financial and business management and DIY.

- Sentencing plans should balance work, education and rehabilitation. To this end, 'work' should not be considered the same as 'rehabilitation' particularly given that many female prisoners have deeply traumatic histories and report benefit from rehabilitation and social support programmes such as *Inner Healing*. Rehabilitation should therefore seek to do more than discourage further criminal behaviour but should also address some of the root causes of such behaviour, including poverty and abuse. In taking women's needs seriously, programmes must be specifically designed *for women* and not just adopted or adapted from men's programmes.
- Work routines should foster a strong commitment to and pride in productive work as part of a *broader scheme* of rehabilitation and foster feelings of investment in, and contribution to, wider society among offenders.
- Prison activities should seek to create egalitarian and appropriate skills that will develop and empower women, without fostering stereotypical gendered notions of 'women's work' that may in fact compound existing histories of dependency and abuse.
- In order to optimise the use of existing facilities, where women are housed in annexes to, or prisons neighbouring men's prisons, a rotation system for women to share in the facilities available at the men's prisons should be established. Such a system needs to provide for sufficient separation from male inmates, for security, as well as sufficient supervision when prisoners are in transit and at the men's prison.
- Peer education and vocational training by selected groups of prisoners with the requisite skills should be encouraged. This will have the additional benefit of increasing peer-educators confidence and work experience. However, peer-education should only comprise a portion of activities available to inmates and should be well planned and structured so as to avoid the sudden or frequent absence of voluntary peer-educators disrupting other inmates' learning. Peer-education should also not be viewed as a substitute for targeted, specialised educational and vocational instruction.
- Partnerships should be fostered between DCS and civil society organisations to offer training and skills as well as to provide prisoners with links to the outside that may provide useful information and support upon release. These programmes, however, must be offered on a regular and structured basis, as opposed to on an *ad hoc* basis.
- The current daily wage for 'work' is a disincentive for engaging in productive work and does little towards promoting a broader rehabilitative model that encourages self-respect and personal development. It is also so meagre that saving wages for release or using wages to support children on the outside is simply impossible. Pay-for-work models should therefore consider the extent to which prisoners can earn sufficient funds to (a) support children and families on the outside; (b) support further education and training not covered by DCS; and (c) create enough funds to support the prisoner on release until she secures work on the outside.
- A more comprehensive pre-release programme should be implemented that addresses basic life skills and provides prisoners with technical knowledge needed to operate in society, including information about the banking system, job applications, and how to access support services. Such a programme should provide sufficient time for weekend and day visits, where prisoners can practice these skills where possible.

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Links Between Health, Mental Health, Work and Reintegration

This is one of two policy briefs that have emerged from the study *Women's Pathways to Prison*. The other brief focuses on the provision of and access to health- and mental health care for women in prison.

Prisons can offer women unique access to health, educational and vocational services that they may not ordinarily have prior to and after incarceration. These types of services, whilst each distinct and beneficial in its own right, are inextricably related in two notable ways. First, opportunities for and access to constructive daily activities, including school, vocational training, and productive work, can substantially benefit an offender's overall well-being. As in the population at large, education and productive work can give individuals a sense of self-worth and self-improvement, as well as distract from other harmful or undesirable pastimes. In the South African prison system, work can be a chance for physical and/or outdoor activity. However, our findings, which comport with those from abroad, indicate that prisoners are often idle, bored and under-stimulated. Incarceration is experienced as 'lie-down time', 'jail mode' or living in a 'dream world' (as described by De Viaggiani, 2007).

Second, poor physical and mental health, as well as addictions and substance abuse, can drastically reduce an individual's employability. Research shows that employers are already hesitant to hire ex-offenders, which when combined with deteriorated physical and mental health, adds to the difficulty of attaining employment (Freeman, 2008). A study of prisoners in the United States by Maillk-Kane and Visser (2008) found that having any type of health condition was associated with either engaging in more criminal activity or having a higher likelihood of re-incarceration. Individuals with physical health, mental health and substance abuse problems reported less incidence, longevity and stability of employment compared to other returning prisoners. Since women typically experienced poorer employment outcomes than men, irrespective of health, "the interaction between gender and health status amounted to a double disadvantage and a large magnitude of difference" (Mailik-Kane and Visser, 2008). Thus it is essential for successful reintegration and the reduction of recidivism that DCS address poor health as an additional barrier to employment.

Recognising these connections can assist in viewing incarceration as rehabilitative, rather than punitive, especially given the histories of abuse and discrimination that lead many women to prison in South Africa.

For further information on women's health issues during incarceration refer to the policy brief entitled *Women in Prison: Health and Mental Health*.

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