Enhancing Female Prisoners' Access to Education

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Abstract

The rate of female incarceration continues to surge, resulting in over 714,000 women currently being held behind bars worldwide. Females generally enter carceral facilities with low educational profiles, and educational programming inside is rarely a high priority. Access to education is a proven contributor to women's social and economic empowerment and can minimise some of the obstacles they encounter after being released from custody. Support for the intellectual potential of incarcerated female 'students' can address intersecting inequalities that impede access to social protection, public services and sustainable infrastructure. Policymakers, academics and activists concerned with gender equality must begin by focusing on academic and vocational program development for female prisoners, built through strong community partnerships, and inclusive of trauma informed supports.

Keywords

Prisons; female prisoners; female incarceration; female offender.

Inclusive, good-quality education is a foundation for dynamic and equitable societies.

Rev. Desmond Tutu

In 1932, when prison reformer Miriam van Waters became the superintendent of the female Framingham Reformatory in Massachusetts (US), she addressed the incarcerated as *students* and noted in her diary that 'names are important. If you call those in prison prisoners or inmates—rather than students—you have taken [the] aspect of their custody, namely the shut-in-by-force and sentenced to hard labor and loss of rank' (Freedman 1996: 191). Acknowledging the importance of language and the power of labels to affect behaviour (Lemert 1951, 1976; Becker 1963), the new superintendent sought to address the prisoners' aptitude for 'training and their willingness to learn', even as her choice of words rhetorically reinforced the women's supplicant position. Van Waters had long held a belief in the power of education to help women function and succeed in society upon their release (Chlup 2006); this belief aligns with many female reformers before her. As early as 1817, the Quaker Elizabeth Fry and her lady visitors pressed authorities for 'more instruction to be given' to women imprisoned in Britain and across the Continent (Fry, Fry and Cresswell 1848: 211). Originally inspired by religious principles and grounded in middle-class philanthropy and maternalism, the Quakers' advocacy for schooling of incarcerated women took root in North America (Freedman 1984; Rafter 1992). When the Elizabeth Fry Society was established in Vancouver in 1939, it was 'the first non-denominational women's organization dedicated entirely to criminalized women' (Sangster 2004: 229). While employing public advocacy to transform gender inequalities in the criminal justice system, the society known as E. Fry evolved into a national federation of 24 feminist, community-based societies (Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies) that provided advocacy, services and programs to marginalised women involved with the criminal justice system (Hayman 2006). However, despite efforts of volunteer organisations and advocacy groups, the educational and vocational needs of female prisoners are rarely a high priority for governments or nation states. Indeed, under the auspices of certain political administrations and changing social climates, many established programs have collapsed or have been greatly diminished.

The lack of educational resources for women is particularly critical, as the number of justice-involved females worldwide continues to escalate. If we are to move in earnest towards the development of an equitable society (Tutu and van Roekel 2010), we must consider the intellectual potential of the hundreds of thousands of 'students' who are currently held behind bars around the globe. Specifically, I call for enhanced educational programming for women and girls, both during incarceration and upon release. I do so in support of the United Nation's (UN) sustainable development goal (SDG) #4 (inclusive and equitable quality education), in conjunction with SDG # 1 (no poverty), SDG #5 (gender equality) and SDG #16 (peaceful and inclusive societies and access to justice for all). To ensure that women have equal and equitable access to social and economic resources and sustainable routes out of poverty, multiple overlapping dimensions of gender inequality must be addressed, beginning with educational access.

Profile of the Female Offender

More than 714,000 women are incarcerated worldwide (Walmsley, 2017). Although females constitute a small percentage of the international prison population, their rate of incarceration (both in pre-trial detention and sentenced) has surged. The increase since 2000 is about 53.3 per cent for female prisoners compared to the 19.6 per cent increase for male prisoners (Walmsley 2017:2). The increase in the number of women and girls imprisoned in Central and South America, and in Southeast Asia (Cambodia and Indonesia) has been especially steep. For example, in Argentina, the population of female prisoners in federal prisons has expanded by nearly 200 per cent in the past two decades (Avon et al. 2013). As the world's leading jailer, the US also imprisons more women than any other country—approximately 211,870 women (Walmsley

2017:2). China has an estimated female prison population of about half that of the US 'plus an unknown number of women and girls in pre-trial detention and "administrative detention"'. Following behind these two nations are the Russian Federation (48,478), Brazil (about 44,700), Thailand (41,119), India (17,834) and the Philippines (12,658) (Walmsley 2017: 2).

International data on female incarceration is limited partly because of inconsistent collection methods and the failure to report crime categories by gender, race or class (Gunninson, Bernat and Goodstein 2017). However, many studies indicate that women generally become involved in criminal behaviour for reasons different from those of men (Chesney-Lind and Hadi 2016), and female actions to defend or assert rights are often criminalised (Neve and Pate 2005; Peratis 2004; Ritchie 2017). Globally, most incarcerated women have been charged with non-violent, often petty, survival crimes (i.e., fraud, forgery, shoplifting and theft). In many countries, women are also imprisoned due to discriminatory laws and cultural practices, or tribal laws or traditions, rather than codified law (Agomoh 2015: 52).

Drug-related offences are common (Bronson and Berzofsky 2017; da Cunha 2005; Diaz-Cotto 2005; Carson 2018; Castro 2019; Constant 2017; Fleetwood 2014; Kajstura 2018; Lawrence and Williams 2006; Reynolds 2008), as are 'sex crimes'—particularly prostitution offences that are 'penalised for "providers" but not for "clients"' (Huber 2015: 7). Incarcerated females are likely to have histories of mental illness (Fazel and Seewald 2012; Houser et al. 2012; McKim 2017), as well as histories of trauma and abuse (Bronson and Berzofsky 2017; Browne, Miller and Maguin 1999; Chesney-Lind, DeHart 2008, 1989; Erez and Berko 2010; Gilfus 1992; Goff et al. 2007; Holsinger 2005). Although precise figures are unavailable, a large percentage of incarcerated women are mothers (Robertson 2012) who are more likely than men to have been custodial parents prior to their incarceration and who plan to return to that role upon release (Alejos 2005; Kruttschnitt 2010; Sudbury 2004; Sapers 2016). This is critically important, as parental incarceration generates a unique combination of trauma, shame and stigma, leaving many vulnerable to the 'triple threat' of depression, violence and addiction (Arditti and Few 2008) and potentially disrupting children's lives (Hairston 2007; Manjoo 2013; Siegel 2011; Uggen and McElrath 2014).

The global phenomenon of increased female incarceration is compounded by the feminisation of poverty and the punitive policies that are spawned by the international war on drugs (Barberet 2014; Reynolds 2008; Sassen 2002). Most incarcerated women are poor and underemployed (Decker et al. 2010; Modi-Moroka 2015; Wesley 2012). In China, for example, poor women with low social status and limited educational opportunities, who are often forced to rely on drug trafficking, prostitution and property crimes, comprise the fastest growing sector of the prison population (Radio Free Asia 2015; Dui Hua 2020). Women prisoners overwhelmingly originate from communities that are marginalised by deindustrialisation and criminal activity, as well as by racial/ethnic segregation and high police surveillance (Sudbury 2005; Soss and Weaver 2017). Consequently, most have limited work histories (often tracing to the black market) and are unlikely to have been employed at the time of their arrest (Decker et al. 2010; Heimer 2000; Roberts 2017). The increased job insecurity and inequalities within and between countries disproportionally affects all women (MacNaughton and Frey 2010). This leads to women experiencing greater difficulties than men in finding legal work post-detention. In the US, formerly incarcerated women of colour—despite being more likely to be looking for work—may 'face the worst labor market disadvantages'; racial and sexual discrimination often contribute to those who are employed being 'relegated to the most insecure jobs' (Couloute and Kopf 2018: 6). Low levels of literacy, unfamiliarity with newer technologies and outright exclusion from particular jobs for those with a criminal record further contribute to poor employment prospects (Gunnison and Helfgott 2013; Petersilia 2003).

Education as a Pathway to Equitable Societies

Access to education is a critical contributor to women's social and economic empowerment; it is a gateway to social and economic mobility and has improved employment opportunities for many incarcerated peoples (Davis et al. 2014; Karpowitz and Kenner 1995). Achieving this has been difficult for many women and girls, partly because they generally enter carceral facilities with low educational profiles and partly because limited educational programming is offered or available inside.

Gendered social norms pertaining to education, family responsibilities (e.g., early marriage and pregnancy, childcare and housework) and limited financial resources intersect to restrict female access to educational resources, even prior to custody. For example, 31.5 per cent of women surveyed in Albania had only eight years of education and 12 per cent had even fewer. As referenced above, among incarcerated females worldwide, the 'levels of crimes committed were found to be linked to education status' (Huber 2015: 5). In Jordan, nearly 25 per cent of women in judicial detention were illiterate (Huber 2015: 5). Thirty-seven per cent of females incarcerated in the US in 2009 had not completed high school and less than a third (31 per cent) had any post-secondary education (Ewert and Wildhagen 2011). Among the incarcerated adult women in England and Wales, nearly a third reported that they had been expelled or permanently excluded from school (Hewson 2018).

Women require gainful employment to survive and advance in society, especially as markets become increasingly globalised and demand higher levels of education and skill (Reynolds 2008). While economic strain positively affects female criminality (Heimer 2000) employment is a preventative measure that serves to reduce the likelihood of women's recidivism (Makarios, Steiner and Travis 2010). However, as is the case in the larger society, educational opportunities in prisons are denied to a significant portion of incarcerated women worldwide (Diaz-Cotto 2005; Farrell et al. 2001; Huber 2015). *Penal Reform International*'s multinational analysis found that prison-based rehabilitation programs rarely address the gender-specific needs of female offenders; fewer educational and training opportunities are available for incarcerated women than for men, of which the existing programs were 'less varied and of poorer quality than those offered to male detainees' (Huber 2015: 15). In Norway, school programs for women were deemed 'invisible' and inaccessible to many female prisoners; the more difficult option was self-study. Women were also frequently banned from vocational education workshops (Quaker Council for European Affairs 2007). Re-entry is difficult for most returning citizens—even more so for females who lack supportive educational resources. This deficiency, combined with the stigma of a criminal record, renders women unlikely to find steady employment or acquire safe housing, diminishing the ability to support and care for their children. If unaddressed during incarceration, the described low levels of education and vocational skills among women prisoners will remain an equally daunting challenge after their release into the community.

Program Development, Community Partnerships and Trauma-Informed Supports

Existing research provides some hope with which to counter this narrative. Substantial evidence reveals that educational opportunities during incarceration can minimise some of the difficulties incarcerated women encounter after they are released. Such opportunities can reduce recidivism and, in the long term, they can improve gender equality (Bozick et al. 2018; Correctional Association of New York 2009; Davis et al. 2014; Muñoz 2009). Women want to engage in learning, not only for the purpose of obtaining a degree, but for planning their futures and those of their family (Halimi et al. 2017). Erisman and Contardo (2005) found that mothers' educational successes inspire their children to take their own education more seriously, which can improve social mobility for families (Conway and Jones 2015). To address the many and intersecting inequalities that obstruct access to social protection, public services and sustainable

infrastructure, policymakers, academics and activists should focus on providing educational services to the most vulnerable and excluded among us—incarcerated women and girls.

Program Development

There is a clear and well-documented need to develop high-quality educational programming, both academic and vocational, for incarcerated women and girls. Such development requires strong advocacy, sustained funding and community involvement. For many females, prison may be the first chance to gain literacy skills or to receive basic education. Vocational training is also key to the social and economic reintegration of women, and post-secondary education can break the cycle of unemployment and incarceration; it can create '[i]nroads of advanced education in communities that suffer from a chronic lack of access' (Center for Community Alternatives n.d.; Correctional Association of New York 2009). There are encouraging examples of educational programming that should be supported, expanded and designed with the purpose and goal of long-term personal and economic self-sufficiency. Just as individuals on the outside use education to invest in their futures and improve their prospects, so too will women in prison, if they are given that opportunity.

Effective program development that has been especially designed for women and girls requires a great deal of advocacy for this politically underrepresented group, as well increased expenditures. It is noteworthy that of the approximately US$81 billion (in 2010 dollars) spent on federal, state and local corrections systems in the US (prisons, jails, parole and probation), only 6 per cent is allocated for any programming for the combined male and female populations (Wagner and Rabuy 2017; Kearney et al. 2014). Education programs do exist, 'but even at the highest estimates, current enrollment reaches less than 2 percent of the 1.5 million people serving prison terms in the United States today' (Hobby, Walsh and Delaney 2019: 1). Organisations such as the Prison Policy Initiative, the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition and the New York-based Women's Prison Association and the College and Community Fellowship have stepped in to advocate for and attend to women's educational needs. The advocacy work of these and other groups and organisations—including those of formerly incarcerated women and men—has generated some bi-partisan support in the US Congress for reversing the 1994 legislation that bans incarcerated students from participating in need- and merit-based financial aid programs.

In nations such as Afghanistan, where financial resources are lacking after years of conflict and where security remains critical, local efforts often depend on international alliances to build the economic foundation necessary to support gender-specific educational projects. For example, the US-based Sunshine Lady Foundation commits over half of its annual budget to purely educational programs, including the Women for Afghan Women project, which educates children of Afghan women in prison. In the belief that education is the surest way to move people out of dependency, the Foundation also prioritises college degree programs in US prisons and education for victims and survivors of domestic violence.

To improve its effectiveness, educational programming must engage appropriate local community and business leaders who can speak to what is needed, available and feasible in the community. Community involvement helps ensure that programming will increase women's chances of earning a living wage, rather than be limited to skills that solely mirror gendered norms of 'women's work' or to undertaking the lowest paid jobs in the economy. An example of community-involved programming is the India Vision Foundation, a voluntary non-profit organisation based in New Delhi. In collaboration with industry partners and six female prisons, the foundation has trained women in crèche building and computer technology, chocolate making, crochet and weaving—industries for which there is a market. Female prisoners are allowed to keep their children with them until the age of six; India Vision runs crèches and nursery schools in prisons and continues to offer educational support through partnerships with

schools once children move into the community. Another project involving community members is the African Prisons Project, which opened a library in a Nairobi women's prison and thus enabled prison staff, their families, female prisoners and their children to access literature and educational materials and to participate in book clubs, debates and creative writing groups. The library includes a legal aid clinic in which women can seek professional advice on their cases.

Community Partnerships

Establishing links between academia and correctional departments—two of society's largest and most highly funded institutional and social structures—is essential for building sustainable prison-based educational programs. Additionally, partnerships must include re-entry organisations whose knowledge and experience compliment and augment the resources of the other two institutional structures (Sawyer 2019). Correctional institutions also benefit from partnerships with workforce development agencies, as they ensure that institutional education, job readiness and employment training match the opportunities available to women outside the prison. Community partnerships facilitate connections and relationships between and among faculty, staff and administrators from seemingly opposite sides. Due to differing perspectives, such relationships can enable several supports and can potentially spur shifts in thinking, new ways of managing resources and a belief in the possibility of social change. For example, the IF Project in Seattle is a collaboration of law enforcement, youth and community outreach programs and currently and formerly incarcerated women working together to prevent and reduce incarceration. Programming includes in-prison writing workshops and a Re-entry mentoring program for incarcerated women.

Educational programs can help connect women with community re-entry services and can assist in the transition to school and employment on the 'outside'. For example, the US Department of Education (2012) has proposed an educational continuum model that bridges services inside jails and prisons with those in the community. Norway, taking a different approach, emphasises the importance of having local community organisations deliver prisoner rehabilitation programs, including educational services. This arrangement holds the community accountable to an extent for ensuring prisoners' successful reintegration. Recognising that many women serve short custodial sentences that do not allow sufficient time for long-term educational programming, the UK's Prisoners' Education Trust (PET) has created an on-line toolkit for developing a range of prison–university partnerships (Reynolds 2018). The Trust's motto—'every prisoner a learner, every prison a place to learn'—informs the toolkit, which includes academic courses, mentoring programs, seminar series and reading groups. In 2017, PET launched the PUPiL network (prison–university partnerships in learning) to map, promote and support community–corrections partnerships.

The Council of Europe's (1990) recommendations include allowing prisoners to participate in education outside prison; if education must occur inside prisons, then the outside community should be involved as fully as possible. A RAND study supports this, finding that an educational program may be most effective in preventing recidivism when it connects prisoners with the outside community (Davis et al. 2014). An example of a strong academic–community partnership is the international 'inside-out prison exchange program' model, a pedagogical approach that brings together incarcerated 'inside' students with 'outside' college students to study as peers within a correctional facility. These courses facilitate a transformative process through which women (and men) can encounter each other across profound social barriers, allowing justice-related issues to be approached in new and different ways. Originating at Temple University in Philadelphia (US), Inside-Out is now established in 10 countries and 34 US states. Some, but not all, Inside-Out courses offer academic credits. But as an assistant commissioner of the New York City Department of Corrections noted, 'Academic credits make the class *mean* something in the outside world' (Torres, personal correspondence). A course is a stepping stone for those who

decide to go to college; for others, who may choose another path, it bolsters confidence to take the next step, or steps, towards successful re-entry.

Trauma-Informed Support

A third recommendation is to incorporate holistic models of trauma-informed supports into gender-responsive educational programming. In conjunction with vocational training and academic programming, women in all prisons have needs stemming from their gendered location in society. Therefore, it is essential that educational programming be linked with services that address women's multiple needs to maintain family connections and respond to factors such as childhood trauma and domestic violence. In 2010, the UN approved the Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (i.e., the Bangkok Rules).

Bangkok Rule #46 requires prison authorities to implement comprehensive and individualised rehabilitation programs that account for women's gender-specific needs and that address the underlying factors that have led to their offending—factors that are too often related to varied and extensive histories of loss and trauma. Although current research indicates that the Bangkok Rules remain aspirational in most poor nations, Kenya has developed limited family programming to assist in maintaining family relationships. Similarly, the NGO Prisoners' Rehabilitation and Welfare Action has worked with the Nigerian government to provide trauma counselling and staff training (Agomoh 2015: 58, 62). A holistic and gender-responsive approach to education would incorporate trauma services, while providing women a safe space and the time to concentrate on learning that will advance their place in society. In this way, educational programming can support the many needs of the primary caregiver, assisting her in transcending the too-often multi-generational cycle of incarceration. An example is the Building Bridges: Community Reintegration Through Education program, an accredited adult basic education program in Canada that offers holistic learning and healing for incarcerated Aboriginal women. It was established as a collaboration between corrections and British Columbia's Aboriginal public post-secondary institute. It is 'unique in its reliance on an indigenous philosophical concept of holism, which honors the interrelationships between the intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and physical realms of learning' (Granger-Brown et al. 2012: 510).

I conclude with a statement from a young woman who was in an Inside-Out course at New City's Rikers jail. When asked what the course meant to her, she said it 'means second chances ... new beginnings, and ... getting ready to better myself and my life. It has kept my hope going. I want to be one of these students, a real student.' (anonymous survey respondent). Her words exemplify the vision of the United Nations' Education 2030 declaration to promote the importance of 'gender equality in achieving the right to education for all' (UNGEI 2017: xi)—not only for the free. The sustainable development goals noted previously link gender equality and this broader educational goal. International pressure must continue to promote the Bangkok Rules and other international instruments that advocate for the respect and protection of all women's rights, including those of the incarcerated (i.e., the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; the United Nations Convention Against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child). As advocates for women prisoners, we must pressure all governments to consider the more than 700,000 incarcerated women as 'real students' and to provide them the necessary educational opportunities that should be used both prior to and after release from custody. Success here would bring us that much closer to realising true gender equality.

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