



Navigating the Uncertainties: A Study of the Challenges Women Offenders Experience Post Prison Release

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Abstract: Life in prison offers a different environment where one's habits are transformed towards integration into prison culture, pushing aside the community culture outside prison walls. Upon release, an ex-offender's status often rooted in their criminal record faces jeopardized perception by common people. This perception deepens and solidifies when those ex-offenders try to reintegrate the society with a shortage of savings, limited ability to produce income, few social supports, and an overall lack of life skills to face these challenges. Their new social identity can face significant discrimination and social deprivation affecting successful community reintegration. We discuss the concept of the well-being of ex-detainees, where emotional well-being is believed to lead to resilience and better integration in society. An individual is connected to society through the relationships they have with others and, social capital refers to the natural or possible resources that result from membership in a supporting group that shares collective capital. Having a connection to others facilitates the internalization of societal norms and constrains the extent to which the individual deviates from societal norms. Research supports these theories in concluding that such connections may exert a protective influence, in particular, against offending behaviour and drug abuse, and that social capital is related to less crime in neighbourhoods and resilience to crime. This research explores the challenges females experience when integrating the society and studies the risk and protective which in turn may influence their resilience and successful integration. We are particularly interested in the female ex-detainees as the increasing number of female offenders across the island urges the need to unveil the factors that influence the social integration of female offenders in Mauritian society.

Keywords: Prison culture, Reintegration, Social capital, Resilience, Stigma.

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

The growth rate of female incarceration in Mauritius is increasing and with this increasing number of incarcerated women, administrators in the criminal justice system have recognized the need for rehabilitation and offender re-entry programs that address the unmet needs of female offenders (Khooblall *et al.*, 2011). Richie (2018) discovered that women who were released from prison faced

numerous challenges, including substance abuse issues, a lack of access to health care, mental health issues, posttraumatic stress disorder, insufficient educational and employment services, neighbourhood conditions, community resources, public policies, and a lack of housing resources. Hence, the main purpose of this study is to investigate the factors affecting the social integration of female offenders. This research provides the background of

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the study, the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, objectives of the study, enumerate the research questions, highlights the significance of the study, the ethical consideration when considering the sample which will consist of offenders, re-offenders and staff of the administration of the Mauritius Prison Service where mixed methods to be utilized to be taken in conducting the research. In this respect, the overarching objective of this current research is to subsequently uncover the key factors that influence the social integration of female offenders in Mauritius.

1.2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Many ex-offenders may suffer the psychological pull of powerlessness and the inevitability of falling back into bad social networks, vicious cycles of substance abuse, and repeated criminality when reintegrating into the society (Larsen *et al.*, 2019), which can leave these individuals in an unstable condition at the genesis of their post-prison lives. It is well-documented that successful reintegration into society can be influenced by ex-offenders' family connections and support (Chikadzi, 2017), residential security (Garland *et al.*, 2011), employment stability (Davis *et al.*, 2013), and access to welfare services (Larsen *et al.*, 2019) during the transition period. Ex-offenders' pre-incarceration social connections, or lack thereof, as well as their personal perceptions about life, are also important determinants of success or failure in reintegration into society (Grommon, E and Rydberg, J 2018).

Inmates have been found to be forced to conform and adapt to their confinement environment, rendering them less prepared for life outside of jail (De Wet, 2015). Everyday routines are modified in order to achieve successful assimilation into local prison culture rather than community culture outside the prison gates (van Dooren *et al.*, 2011). Some academics go even farther, claiming that the prison system can stifle a person's growth and overall way of life by modifying the individual's habits, routines, and behaviours in ways that do not correspond to contemporary lifestyle. (De Wet, 2015). Some inmates have identified these prison-specific norms to be the way of life which tends to leave a persistent, negative post-prison impact (Chikadzi, 2017). Other inmates, on the other hand, come to see jail as a pseudo-safe zone where they may maintain abstinence from criminal behaviour, which is difficult to replicate in the society due to the social barriers that await them upon release (Larsen *et al.*, 2019).

After release, an ex-offender's reputation is frequently based on their criminal record and the resulting sense of untrustworthiness. This view

grows and strengthens when ex-offenders attempt to reintegrate into society with little resources, limited ability to create income, few supports, an overall lack of job and life skills, experiences, and comprehension of modern societal norms (Soeker *et al.*, 2013). Instead of establishing new lives alongside non-criminals and flourishing citizens, ex-offenders face stigma, the notion that they no longer fit into society, and the resulting feelings of defeatism. According to research, the absence of acceptance and the means to be accepted might be the stimulus for a number of emotional reactions, leading to a relapse into the maladaptive activities that led the ex-offender's original sentence (Brown, 2004).

Many ex-offenders strive to adopt the lifestyle of a productive and affluent citizen during the process of community reintegration. However, ex-offenders' new social identities can lead to severe prejudice and social impoverishment, which has a negative impact on successful community reintegration. Social deprivation is defined as a condition in which individuals are deprived of opportunities to engage in meaningful and necessary everyday activities as a result of environmental causes beyond their control (Whiteford, 2010). Wilcock (2012) discussed that prolonged social deprivation will diminish health and self-efficacy by inhibiting personal growth, adaptability, and overall wellbeing. Lack of economic support, barriers to work prospects, stigmatization (bias, discrimination, prejudices, rejection, and stereotypes), and the repercussions of incarceration are some of the social deprivations that ex-offenders face when they re-enter society (Martin *et al.*, 2020). Larsen *et al.*, (2019) provided an example of the effect of these deprivations by portraying an ex-offender who experienced employment instability and reunited with pre-prison friends, which led him to use drugs again and become homeless, and eventually resulted in criminal behaviour (Larsen *et al.*, 2019). Similarly, van Dooren *et al.*, (2011) portrayed another example by showing that the diminished social status of ex-offenders, along with being stigmatized by society, adversely impacted their self-esteem and ability to conform to the present-day social norms, which were recognized as imperative to their transition into and connection with their community following release.

1.2. Problem statement

In recent years, the number of female offenders in Mauritius has increased considerably. In the year 2020, there were approximately 176 women offenders serving federal sentences in Mauritius. It is further conceded that the percentage of total prison population in 2000 was 4.7% which increased considerably to 6.3% in 2022. The increasingly number of female offenders across the island, clearly identifies the need and urgency to unveil the factors

that influence the social integration of female offenders in the Mauritian society, given that many of them are found to be ex-offenders.

Fleury-Steiner and Wooldredge (2020) note that the majority of prison victimization research focuses on male inmates, with much less attention directed toward the female inmates. This lack of awareness is unfortunate, as female inmates also engage in violent offenses against one another while incarcerated. Surveying five adult prisons in a Midwestern state, Wulf Ludden (2013) finds that the chance of physical victimization in prison for men and women was 50% and 30%, respectively. Other studies suggest the magnitude of victimization experienced by incarcerated women is even more significant than the 30%, with some studies suggesting that the prevalence of in-prison violent victimization is quite similar for male and female inmates (Wooldredge J, Steiner B., 2013). Altogether, these studies reveal that imprisoned women experience considerable rates of prison victimization, and research is needed to uncover the key factors that influence the social integration of female offenders.

1.3. Aims and Objectives

The aim of this current study is to identify the factors that influence the successful integration of female offenders into Mauritian society. The study also aims to contribute to the limited research in this area in order to develop more effective programs to aid in the integration of female offenders into society.

The objectives of study are:

- To explore the female offenders' expectations when integrating the society.
- To investigate the barriers female offenders experience when integrating the society.
- To discuss the existing mechanisms to facilitate the integration of female offenders in the society.

1.4. Significance of study

This research will contribute significantly towards identifying the different barriers that pose restriction to the social integration of female offenders. This comprehensive study is intended to unravel, highlight and examined factors like Gender based violence, unemployment and secure housing faced by female offenders. At a mezzo level, this study can also better assist prison welfare officers and programs coordinators in developing programmes that targets the female offender's criminogenic needs for attaining social integration. While at a macro level policy decision maker can formulate better bills/acts to assist female offenders upon release such achieving more sustainable development goals for Mauritius and also the study will be a step to create a better plan or path for ex-offenders.

1.5 METHODOLOGY

Based upon the overarching objective of this research on factors affecting social integration amongst female offenders in Mauritius, the study concentrates on two populations of interest. One is ex-female offenders and the other is social workers and officers who work with offenders and ex-offenders in areas such as rehabilitation, drug addiction and, social welfare benefit.

This study therefore used a mixed method approach, and did a data triangulation to explore the different challenges women ex-offenders face when they are released from prisons. According to official statistics (CSO 2022), there were 161 women detainees as compared to 176 in 2020. Based on these statistics, (twenty) 20 women who had just been released in the past 3 months were selected based on their accessibility and convenience, hence using convenience sampling. They were mainly recruited from social security offices and NGOs where they are often seen to seek help. With regards to objective number 3, it was deemed more appropriate to also collect data from social workers within the prison setting as well as those working outside the prison in the rehabilitation process. All the officers concerned were informed through their respective departments about this research and those who were available and willing to participate had to contact the researcher. Ten (10) people thus came forward and the focus group discussion is chosen as method due to predefined demographic traits, and the questions are designed to shed light on the topic of interest. Some of the main questions that formed the basis of the semi-structured interview were:

To the ex-detainees:

- How did you feel when you were about to be released? What were your expectations when you are back?
- How would you best describe your experiences with family and friends when you went back to them? (Why)

To the social workers

- What type of difficulties do you perceive women ex-offenders face upon their release?
- Why do these arise?
- What mechanisms are there in place to help them cope with? Are these mechanisms effective? Why?
- What can be further done?

Once the data was gathered, a deductive thematic analysis was done to manually extract meaningful words/phrases to which codes were applied and these codes were then grouped to themes.

1.6 MAIN FINDINGS

The first research objective aimed to explore how they felt when the day to go back home was finally there and what were their expectations. Those emotions reported were: Anxious/worried, Nervous, Hesitant, Happy and Thrilled. However, most of them reported feelings of anxiety. Going back home should normally be a reason to be happy about, or thrilled about, which can also be seen as emotions that respondents had upon release. However, feelings of anxiety and being hesitant give way to assume that there are solid grounds why such feelings. Where to go, how to earn money, image in the family and community. The expectations that they reported were Support from family members Financial governmental support, Stable income, Employment opportunities, Acceptance in the society, Basic needs (food, shelter and clothing), Pension, Love and care from family, Love and care from the community.

1.6.1 Themes emerging from ex-offenders

Financial difficulty

According to the participants, female offenders face a range of challenges when reintegrating the society after their serving time in prison. One of the main difficulties they experience is financial difficulty. This arises from a variety of factors. For example, the respondents believed that many they have limited job skills and work experience, which make it difficult to find employment once they are released. They also have difficulty securing housing and accessing social services, which further exacerbate their financial challenges. Moreover, female offenders face stigma and discrimination related to their criminal history, which make it difficult to secure employment.

Lack of family support

In addition to financial difficulties, the female offenders also experience a lack of family support when reintegrating the society. This lack of support is a significant challenge for female offenders, as family support is often crucial to their successful re-entry into society. According to the participants, there are many reasons for this, such as they have strained relationships with family members due to their criminal history and some have lost touch with family members while incarcerated. They also come from families that have experienced their own challenges, such as drug addiction. Moreover, some women also report that due to being in prison, they got separated from their husband/partner and are no longer accepted when back.

Drug addiction

Drug addiction is a significant challenge faced by many female offenders when reintegrating into society. Many struggle with drug addiction, leading to a range of negative consequences that

make it more difficult to successfully reintegrate into society. The participants believed that drug addiction leads to health problems, financial difficulties, and legal issues, as well as strained relationships with family and friends. According to the participants, drug addiction also increases the risk of recidivism, as female offenders struggle to maintain sobriety and are more likely to engage in criminal activity to support their drug use. They believe that this can lead to further involvement with the criminal justice system and make it even more difficult to successfully reintegrate into society.

1.6.2 Themes merging from social workers

Pre-release programs

One of the very first programs that are identified by the focus group is the pre-release programs. There are several programs in place to facilitate the integration of female offenders into society when they are in prison. One such program is the pre-release program, which is designed to help female offenders prepare for their release into the community. The respondents believed that the goal of this program is to reduce recidivism rates by providing female offenders with the skills, knowledge, and resources they need to successfully reintegrate into society. The pre-release program typically includes a range of services and activities, such as job training and education, substance abuse counselling, mental health services, parenting classes, and housing assistance. The participants also revealed that the program also provides opportunities for female offenders to engage in community service projects or other activities that allow them to give back to their communities. Pre-release programs are carried out twice a month with female offenders. Pre-release programs are designed to help prepare female offenders for their eventual release from prison and their integration back into society. They believed that by offering pre-release programs twice a month, female offenders are given frequent opportunities to participate in these activities and prepare themselves for their eventual release.

Counselling with NGO

Counselling with NGOs is one of the programs suggested by the respondents and which are in place to facilitate the integration of female offenders into society when they are in prison. In Mauritius, NGOs play an important role in providing support and services to female offenders before and after their release from prison. The participants believed that NGOs offer a variety of services to female offenders, such as counselling, job training, education, housing assistance, and legal aid. Counselling is a particularly important service for female offenders, as many of them have experienced trauma, abuse, or other issues that can affect their

mental health and well-being. By providing counselling services, NGOs help female offenders address these issues and develop coping skills to manage them. Counselling is also beneficial in helping female offenders build positive relationships with their families and communities. According to them, many female offenders face stigma and social isolation after their release from prison, which can make it difficult for them to find housing, employment, and other resources. The respondents believed that by working with NGOs, female offenders receive support and guidance on how to navigate these challenges and build positive relationships with their communities.

SME Training Program

The respondents of the focus group narrated that the Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) Training Program is one of the programs in place to facilitate the integration of female offenders into society when they are in prison. They believed that this program is designed to provide female offenders with the skills and knowledge they need to start their own businesses or find employment in the SME sector upon their release from prison. The SME Training Program typically includes a range of services and activities, such as business planning, marketing, financial management, and entrepreneurship training. The focus group also believed that the program may also provide opportunities for female offenders to participate in apprenticeships or internships with local businesses, which can help them gain practical experience and build their networks in the SME sector. By providing training and support in entrepreneurship and business management, the SME Training Program can help female offenders become self-sufficient and financially independent upon their release from prison. This, in turn, reduces their risk of recidivism and promotes their successful reintegration into society.

Training in workshop

According to the social workers, the programs in place to facilitate the integration of female offenders into society are carried out daily and that there are a variety of programs available to female offenders. They further put forward that carrying out programs daily is beneficial in several ways. For example, it helps female offenders develop a routine and structure to their day, which is helpful in reducing stress and anxiety. It also ensures that they have access to the support and resources they need on a consistent basis, which can be critical in promoting their successful reintegration into society.

Psychological support

The respondents believed that rehabilitation programs help to resolve the difficulties that female

offenders experience in Mauritius by providing psychological support to offenders. Rehabilitation programs provide psychological support to female offenders in a variety of ways, including counselling, therapy, and mental health education. These programs as highlighted by the participants help female offenders to understand their mental health conditions, develop coping strategies, and learn how to manage their symptoms. The respondents narrated that the psychological support helps the female offenders to build resilience and develop positive coping strategies that can help them to manage stress and anxiety during their reintegration process. This is helpful for female offenders who lack family support.

1.7 DISCUSSION

According to Fortune (2011) and Fortune *et al.*, (2020), many women face myriads of problems and these problems are specific to each one of them. This can lead to guilt, worry, dread, and isolation which can in turn lead to low self-esteem, putting these women at risk of rejection, alienation, and a decreased feeling of well-being once they are released from jail. This is what could be observed from both the group of respondents. Another striking research of community re-entry conducted with women in prison by Yuen *et al.*, (2012) revealed the recurrence of two primary themes. According to the researchers, one of these themes included feeling of isolation from the community before to and exacerbated by jail experiences. To the authors, this suggests that women coming out from jail need to feel more connected to their communities. The second theme was leisure and community re-entry, which portrayed the complexities of leisure for women in jail as well as the limits for returning to the community (Yuen *et al.*, 2012). These findings somewhat corroborate with this study as these women talk about how life has been and how they no more experience connectiveness with their family and community because they are not welcome back. Moreover, Mauritius being still rooted in patriarchal values makes it more difficult to have a say. Hence, if the quality and availability of social reintegration supports available to women leaving jail are inadequate, it may jeopardize the woman's health and well-being. There is a high incidence of drugs among this group, which for many started as a way of earning money, to end with being the victims, often exacerbated by the very rejection of the family and/or community following release from jail.

1.8 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

These findings are eye-opening for a democratic country like Mauritius where social conditions are the state's priority that give meaning and purpose to every citizen's life, particularly the socially excluded people. Understanding the

experiences of women entering community from prison, including individual feelings and expectations of proper social conditions, is therefore vital for researchers gain a deeper knowledge of women's lives and, eventually, to discover how community may better support women.

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