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Research Article

Education as a Rehabilitation Strategy for Women in Selected Prisons in Kenya: The Practice, Challenges and the Way Forward

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Abstract

Education is an important component of rehabilitation for women in prison, yet meaningful learning opportunities may be constrained by institutional priorities, limited resources and competing demands on prisoners' time. This paper examines the provision of formal and non-formal education in selected women's prisons in Kenya, identifies challenges in programme implementation and proposes measures to improve educational access and quality. The study drew on interviews with 70 incarcerated women and 36 key informants across five purposively selected prisons, supported by documentary review and observation. The inquiry considered programme organisation, instructional staffing, learning facilities, resource allocation and institutional support. Participants described tensions between education and routine prison work, shortages of trained teachers, inadequate classrooms and learning materials, inconsistent administrative support and limited monitoring of educational outcomes. The findings also suggest that access to educational programmes varied according to institutional arrangements and available resources. These observations reflect the experiences of the selected participants and institutions and are not intended as statistically representative estimates for all prisons in Kenya. The paper recommends a dedicated prison education administration and budget, a coherent policy framework for the delivery of education in custodial institutions, stronger coordination with education authorities, improved provision of learning materials and deployment of qualified teaching personnel. It further recommends systematic monitoring and additional research to inform prison education policy. As the fieldwork and several documentary sources are historical, these findings describe conditions during the study period and should not be treated as evidence of current practice in every Kenyan prison.

Keywords

Prison education, Women in prison, Rehabilitation, Kenya

1. Introduction

Prisoners tend to enter prison with less education than the general population [9]. Therefore, education is important for prisoners because it can increase problem solving abilities, social interaction skills, and a sense of self-efficacy all of which are characteristics found to be associated with pro-social behavior [1, 13]. Education can reduce crime by increasing skills and employment opportunities, thus reducing crime that is committed for financial gain [4, 16]. In addition, education

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can increase exposure to pro-social people and situations, which can promote pro-social attitudes and behaviors [5, 14]. Education among prisoners is seen to play important roles in righting the social wrongs, opening opportunities to the offender and ensuring their rehabilitation and a sense of social responsibility. Education can improve conditions within correctional facilities, enhance prisoner self-esteem and function as a cost-effective approach to reducing recidivism. Education offers a chance to break the cycle of inequality and benefit both the formerly incarcerated person and the society in which she lives. Research consistently demonstrates that participation in educational programs while incarcerated reduces recidivism rates by increasing an individual's ability to successfully rejoin mainstream society upon release from prison [2].

Formerly incarcerated people often experience difficulties in gaining employment after release from prison, both because they lack marketable skills and because they may face discrimination due to their criminal records [15]. Successfully completing a class, or better still completing school, can help prisoners recognize that hard work leads to positive results. These successes also can produce changes in attitude that will be valuable after an individual is released from prison. A study by Bedford Hills found that female prisoners enrolled in education program became better able to judge the consequences of their actions and to take responsibility for them. As a result, women in the program were more likely to see themselves as active participants in determining their own future and thus make choices that would help improve their situation [3].

A three state evaluation of the effect of academic or vocation education on recidivism found that offenders who participated in these types of programs were significantly less likely to recidivate within three years of release than those released without such programming.

The next section discusses education programs which women in prison in Kenya have access to: The section analyses these programs in terms of nature, management, resource availability, adequacy, effectiveness and relevance to women in prison. The section highlights the challenges facing the prison department in its effort to rehabilitate prisoners through education.

2. Materials and Methods

The study sought geographical and institutional variation among women's prisons in Kenya. It therefore used a combination of geographical selection and purposive sampling to include different prison settings and categories of incarcerated women. The resulting sample was intended to capture diverse experiences rather than to provide a statistically representative estimate for all women in Kenyan prisons.

For sampling purposes, the country was considered in eight regions: Nairobi, Central, Rift Valley, Eastern, Western, North Eastern, Coast and Nyanza. Five regions were purposively selected, with one women's prison chosen in each. Selection considered institutional type, security, distance and the size of the female prison population. North Eastern and parts of Western Kenya were not sampled because of reported security concerns at the time of the study. Nairobi was included because it contained Lang'ata Women's Prison. The selection yielded five women's prisons; it was purposive and should not be interpreted as a probability sample.

Women were selected purposively with attention to offence category, sentence length, previous convictions and time already served. Between ten and fifteen women were interviewed in each selected prison, giving a total of 70 interviewees. Where a selected participant was unavailable, another eligible woman was selected. The sample included people convicted of property, violent and drug-related offences. Because replacement and selection were non-random, the findings describe the experiences of participants and should not be generalised statistically.

The study interviewed 70 women in prison and 36 key informants involved in education and rehabilitation, for a total of 106 participants. Key informants included institutional administrators, educators, welfare personnel, prisoner trustees and a volunteer counsellor. Table 1 presents the composition of the sample. The analysis relied on interviews and documentary triangulation rather than statistical inference.

Table 1. *Sample Size Matrix (Key Informant's and Women in Prison).*

Directorate / category	Number interviewed
Planning and Development Officer	1
Head of Rehabilitation and Welfare Directorate	1
Finance Directorate	1
Teachers (volunteers and incarcerated educators)	16
Spiritual Welfare Officers	6
Prisoner trustees	5
Volunteer psychological counsellors	6
Subtotal: key informants	36
Women in prison	70
Total participants	106

Source: Author (2014).

The study also drew on official records, administrative reports, academic literature, newspapers and publicly available material. Interview accounts were compared with documentary evidence where possible. This triangulation supported interpretation of the findings; it did not establish statistical representativeness. The data and findings concern education in prisons, rather than counselling alone.

Research in custodial settings presented practical and ethical limitations. Access to operational information was restricted, participants were subject to institutional confidentiality rules, and photography within prison facilities was not permitted. Interviews, document analysis and observation were therefore used together to corroborate information when feasible. These constraints, the purposive sample and the historical period of data collection limit the reach of the findings.

3. Formal Education Programme in Women's Prison in Kenya: The Practice

Formal education in this study refers to primary, secondary and post-secondary learning. The Constitution of Kenya recognises the right to education [12]. The findings suggest that, in the facilities studied, education was frequently scheduled around cleaning duties and other prison work. Interview accounts indicated that industrial and agricultural activities received more institutional time than classroom learning. The study raises the possibility that income-generating programmes were prioritised, but does not establish that financial returns were the sole reason for this allocation.

Against the framework of the Prisons Act and Standing Orders [10, 11], the study identified the absence of a clearly operationalised, prison-specific education framework as a significant barrier to consistent delivery. Respondents described uncertainty over programme priorities, staffing arrangements and minimum education provision. The study accordingly recommends an explicit policy framework aligned with the applicable education laws, supported by an administrative unit with responsibility for implementation and monitoring. This finding relates to the policy arrangements examined during the study period and requires reassessment before being treated as a current nationwide legal conclusion.

Participants reported shortages of teachers, classrooms, desks and textbooks in the prisons studied. At Eldoret Women's Prison, for example, respondents described using prison wards as classrooms and sharing very limited textbooks. The study also recorded reliance on incarcerated or locally recruited teachers rather than a consistent deployment of Teachers Service Commissionn (TSC) personnel. Respondents associated low remuneration and turnover with interruptions to learning. These observations indicate concerns about instructional continuity and quality assurance; they should not be read as a verified account of staffing arrangements in every prison today.

The study additionally identified differences between the educational opportunities described in women's institutions and those reported in some men's prisons. Respondents cited professional accountancy training associated with Nairobi Prison, Strathmore University and the Kenya Accountants and Secretaries National Examinations Board (KASNEB). This comparison indicates a potential disparity warranting further investigation rather than establishing uniform discrimination across all institutions.

Respondents indicated that documentary requirements for national examinations could prevent some eligible prisoners from registering when identification documents were unavailable. At the time of the research, the examinations discussed included the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) and the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE). This example is historical; current examination and registration requirements should be checked separately.

Other challenges affecting this programme include lack of government funds for educational and library services. This has contributed to poor quality of education in prisons. Due to the low uptake of formal education in most prisons, non-formal education is used to bridge the gap. The next section analyses non-formal education showing its strengths and weaknesses in relation to its implementation in prisons.

4. Adult Learning and Education (Non-Formal Education): The Practice

Adult learning in Kenya has included community-based programmes addressing literacy and practical needs such as health, agriculture and household welfare. The study's documentary sources trace a nationally organised adult and continuing education initiative to 1979, when reducing adult illiteracy and supporting participation in economic and civic life were central objectives. The same sources report an estimated decline in adult illiteracy from 50% in 1979 to 38.5% in 2006 [7]. These are historical estimates and should not be interpreted as current national literacy rates.

For adults who have experienced limited access to schooling, non-formal education may offer a flexible route to acquiring literacy, numeracy and practical skills. The Kenya National Adult Literacy Survey reported that 61.5% of adults reached the minimum literacy threshold in its survey period, while 38.5% did not; the survey also reported differences between men (64.1%) and women (58.9%) [7]. These historical figures provide context for the importance of accessible learning, but they do not establish literacy rates among the incarcerated women interviewed in this study.

The study draws on the adult and continuing education approach to argue that prison programmes should respond to learners' needs, educational starting points and practical post-release goals. Non-formal provision can complement accredited schooling when it supports literacy, everyday problem-solving and skills that participants may use after release.

The study distinguishes basic literacy, post-literacy learning, non-formal skills training and continuing education. Basic literacy develops reading, writing, communication and numeracy. Post-literacy opportunities help learners retain and apply those competencies, while non-formal activities may combine practical skills such as weaving, basketry or farming

with foundational learning. Continuing education enables participants to build on prior qualifications or skills. Respondents also described certificates that did not identify the holder as having studied in prison, potentially reducing stigma during the search for work. The value of such certificates depends on the relevant accrediting arrangements.

In the period addressed by the documentary materials, funding for adult learning and education (ALE) is not the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and therefore it is not catered for in that ministry's budget. The Ministry of Education's budget caters for other sub sectors of education including Early Childhood Development (ECD), primary school education, secondary school education, technical and teachers training, as well as university education. The Department of Adult Education has been receiving funding from the Kenya Education Sector Support Programme (KESSP). By not allocating funds for ALE directly from the Ministry of Education implies that ALE is of lesser importance compared to other sub-sectors of education in the country.

Table 2 reports historical government development-expenditure figures as reproduced in the study's documentary sources. The figures require checking against the original expenditure estimates before they are used to support precise budget comparisons.

Table 2. *Trends in Education Expenditure.*

Financial year	Department of Adult Education (KES)	Ministry of Education (KES)
1998/1999	16,901,800	329,121,160
1999/2000	13,460,000	343,326,840
2000/2001	706,872,644	384,231,951
2001/2002	815,850,199	447,818,042
2002/2003	11,200,000	615,581,000
2004/2005	12,500,000	3,813,401,800
2005/2006	11,000,000	3,658,140,980
2006/2007	13,000,000	3,223,733,190
2007/2008	13,000,000	3,316,618,719
2008/2009	11,200,100	3,687,875,098
2010/2011	10,765,000	4,876,000,000
2012/2013	9,453,000	4,954,765,000

Source: Republic of Kenya- Government Expenditure Estimates (2013); National Report on Development and State of the Art of Adult Learning Education, (2008).

The historical figures reproduced in Table 2 suggest that adult education generally received substantially less development funding than the broader education sector. However, the individual figures and financial-year labels should be reconciled with the original budget documents before any precise year-by-year percentage is asserted. The study uses the table to illustrate concerns about resource prioritisation rather than to estimate the current funding of prison education.

Drawing in part on historical prison reform reporting [6], the study's documentary review identified concerns about limited funding for educational programmes in prisons. It noted that the cited 2011 Economic Survey did not separately identify a prison adult-education budget and that government progress reporting had described funding shortfalls and delayed disbursements as implementation obstacles. These sources support a historical concern about constrained resources but do not by themselves establish current funding levels.

The study notes that adult-learning funds and related public education resources historically supported a wide range of functions, including vocational training, agriculture, health education and community development. When funding is spread across several priorities without clear allocations, programmes for incarcerated learners may be overlooked. The paper therefore recommends a transparent, dedicated prison education budget and clearer identification of responsibilities among implementing institutions.

Implementation of this programme in prison faces other challenges which include low participation which is blamed on a number of factors that include lack of learning centres, lack of interest in the type of programs offered, preoccupation with daily routines of the prison, illiterate adults in prison view themselves as "too old" to attend school, and more specifically lack

of literacy teachers. It is obviously necessary that these factors be addressed so as to have more women in prison join the programme.

The Kenya National Adult Literacy Survey reported that, in the 2006–2007 survey reports [7, 8], 41% of adult-learning facilities were government owned and 59% were managed by non-state providers, including faith-based, community-based and non-governmental organisations. These historical national proportions should not be assumed to describe the ownership or resourcing of learning facilities inside prisons.

Reading materials for adult literacy learners are inadequate and out dated and sometimes completely inexistent in some prisons. This has made adult learners to rely heavily on materials meant for children in the formal school system yet they are not appropriate for adults.

Limited research has been conducted in relation to prison education. Lack of well informed database to adequately guide the support of Non-formal education is cited by the Second Annual Progress Report on the implementation of the First Medium Term Plan (2008-2012) of Kenya vision 2030 as one of the challenges the sector is experiencing in its efforts to achieve its targets.

Number of trained teachers is inadequate. Most teachers are volunteers or inmates and may not have been teacher before incarceration but had some levels of education. The teachers do not attend any in-service training to update themselves on changes in education trends. The study also revealed that there is very high level of drop out of inmates due to low motivation, discouragement from other inmates, and lack of counseling.

5. Recommendations

There is need to have a fully-fledged Directorate of education with a clear budget to cater for education needs of all prisoners in the country. There is also need to establish a Prison Board to manage and control education services in prisons;

Education policy for inmates should be developed, and it should be in line with the Education Act to successfully operationalize education program in prison. The policy should provide a comprehensive framework of principles and strategies to be pursued in order to achieve equity and equality in education. The policy should guide the implementation of education programs in all prisons in the country in terms of time allocation, resource allocation, expected results etc;

The government, prison department and welfare agencies should work in collaboration with each other to enhance the implementation of education program in prison. This will reduce duplication of services offered by different agencies and also increase the chances of prisoners securing employment after release from the prison; Teacher's Service Commission should support the program by posting qualified teachers to teach in prisons. This will make it possible for the Commission to be responsible for quality assurance and evaluation of curriculum implementation in prisons; there is need to conduct more research on role of education in the reformation of prisoners, this will inform proper policy formulation on prison education.

Abbreviations

ACE	Adult and Continuing Education
ALE	Adult Learning and Education
DAE	Department of Adult Education;
FBO	Faith-Based Organisation
CBO	Community-Based Organisation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
KASNEB	Kenya Accountants and Secretaries National Examinations Board
KCPE	Kenya Certificate of Primary Education
KCSE	Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education
KNALS	Kenya National Adult Literacy Survey
KNBS	Kenya National Bureau of Statistics
TSC	Teachers Service Commissio

Author Contributions

Ruth Joyce Nyawira Kaguta: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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