



Role of libraries and information in the empowerment of women prisoners in Uganda

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Abstract:

*Libraries provide information that meets recreational, lifelong learning, and transitional needs of prisoners, preparing them to be successful ex-offenders. Prison libraries in Uganda were established by non-governmental organizations, as a way of rehabilitating inmates back into society as changed persons, ready to contribute towards development of the country. This paper explores the role that libraries play in transforming women prisoners. A study was conducted to establish benefits from library services such as those provided by the African Prisons Project. **Methodology:** Twenty eight women prisoners from two prisons: 18 from Luzira and 10 from Kigo Women's Prison were interviewed. **Findings:** Libraries meet women prisoners' needs for education, recreation and culture. **Recommendations:** More library collections on women empowerment and more literacy sessions for women prisoners.*

Introduction

Libraries are associated with access to information. Prisoners, like any other category of people have a right of access to information, irrespective of whether they are guilty or not guilty of their offences. The public has a conviction that prisoners are 'enemies of society' and should therefore be treated thus, i.e. that prison libraries should not get the attention and support they need in order to provide consistent and meaningful services (Coyle, 1987). One of the core values of the Uganda Prisons Services states that: 'Men and women shall as far as

possible be detained in separate institutions. In an institution which receives both men and women, the whole of the premises allocated to women shall be entirely separate'. However, women inmates remain at a disadvantage. They are more vulnerable to diseases and unwanted pregnancies. They also lack the confidence to look for information which could make them live better and hopeful lives while in prison, and also make them ready to transform their lives once out of prison.

Given that background, the study set out to explore the role that libraries play in transforming women prisoners.

Background

Uganda has 222 prisons, 80% of which lack educational facilities, including libraries (Uganda Prisons Service Census, 2007). Women prisons are usually annexed to men prisons, though in rare cases women's prisons are independent. Luzira Women Prison, formerly known as Victoria Prison is located about 3 kilometers from Kampala, the capital of Uganda. It has a capacity of 76 inmates, though currently, it accommodates 272. The categories of inmates, (at the time of the study), consisted of 122 remands, 137 convicts and 13 debtors (Prisoners' Statistical Returns, February 2010). It is the biggest maximum security prison for women in the country. The Prison, being near the capital city, has privileges from different non-governmental organizations because it is easily accessible. The women have a small library situated outside the perimeter fence. It has two book box systems established by the African Prisons Project (APP) to ensure that inmates have access to books at all times. The room that serves as the library also serves as an office to the welfare officers.

Kigo women prison, a local farm prison built to accommodate 36 prisoners and is located on the shores of Lake Victoria. At the time of the study, the Prison had 50 women inmates plus 6 babies of ages 1 month to four years. The prisoners and staff have a book box system, also established by APP. Most of the women in Kigo prison are illiterate and are currently undergoing functional adult literacy programmes facilitated by APP.

Women empowerment

The World Bank (2002) defined empowerment as the process of enhancing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. It involves self-decisions regarding education, participation, mobility, economic independence, public speaking, awareness and exercise of rights, political participation and many more factors. Other elements include access to information, ability to make decisions or choices and increased self-esteem. In short women empowerment is the breaking of personal limitations (United Nations Guidelines, 1995). It fosters power in women for use in their lives, communities and society by acting on issues that they define important. Therefore, women empowerment is a multi dimensional social process that helps women gain control over their lives (Nanette, 1999).

Information materials in the library

Library materials included religious literature such as Bibles and self help books; novels, story books and picture books; newspapers and magazines; textbooks on UNEB (Uganda National Examination Board) syllabus, teacher guidebooks and pamphlets; reference materials such as dictionaries; and children's /baby books and dolls.

Role of libraries in empowering women prisoners

Libraries play a vital role in providing information which drives the development of a nation economically, politically and socially. Such information may empower women prisoners to make choices in all areas of development, as well as open up doors for them to get work after release. Through libraries and education, women are able to realize their human rights and this has the potential to bring about gender balance in society (Wambui, 2007). Furthermore, education; is the total sum of experiences that a person acquires in partaking in everyday activities and how these experiences serve to make an individual a better person. The most effective way to contribute to women's empowerment while in prison is by opening and widening access to education which gives them a sense of belongingness (Ojo, 2006).

Functional and Adult Literacy Programs

Functional adult literacy programs were incorporated within the library system of the two prisons, to enable inmates who are keen on learning, to acquire the necessary education while they serve their sentences. As per the APP March 2011 education statistics, the number of women attending the literacy classes in Luzira Prison was 50, while 30 women in Kigo attended the classes.

Methodology

Data was collected using face-to-face interviews. This method was preferred because it gives the interviewers descriptive responses in which the inmates are able to give their own views and opinions about libraries in prisons.

Selection of participants

Two women prisons in central Uganda were selected for this study, i.e. Luzira and Kigo women prisons. The selection was based on those prisons which had at least some educational facilities that supported literacy.

All those female inmates that visited the two libraries from Monday 14th February to Friday 18th February 2011 were interviewed. By the evening of Friday 18th, 10 and 18 women had visited Kigo and Luzira Libraries respectively. Therefore, the total number interviewed was 28 women.

The participants included women who had come to prison as far back as 1995 to new prisoners of 2011. While some were divorced, others were married, though being in prison, they were not sure of the status of their marriages. The rest were single.

Data Collection Instrument

The instrument used to collect data was an interview schedule which comprised of questions on demographic characteristics of the women: their age bracket, date when they came to the prison, their marital status and levels of education. Another section comprised of questions on how they knew of the presence of a library in the prison, their use of the available library services: why they used the library and what the library has contributed in their empowerment as women.

Presentation and discussion of findings

a) Demographic characteristics of participants

The women interviewed were of ages 18 to 55 years, as Table 1 shows.

Table 1: Age of participants

Age bracket	Luzira	Kigo
18-22	6	4
23-27	6	3
28-32	4	1
33-55	2	2
Total	18	10

The figures in the table indicate that women of ages 18 to 22 use the library more than other age brackets. This may mean that younger adults are more active information seekers than older adults.

The participants' levels of education ranged from primary school level to diploma and degree levels, as Figure 1 indicates.

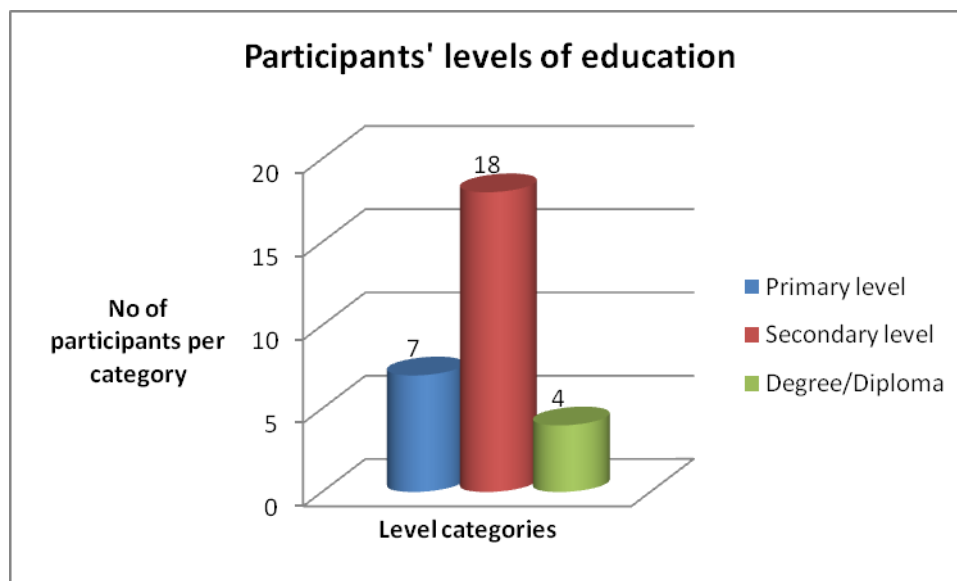


Figure 1: Participants' Levels of Education

There were more participants who had secondary level of education than primary and diploma/degree levels. This could mean that there are more inmates in that age range or that women in that age bracket visit the library more often and that's why they were selected to participate in the study.

The majority of the participants were single (15). Only 4 were divorced while 9 were married. Figure 2 shows the marital status of the participants.

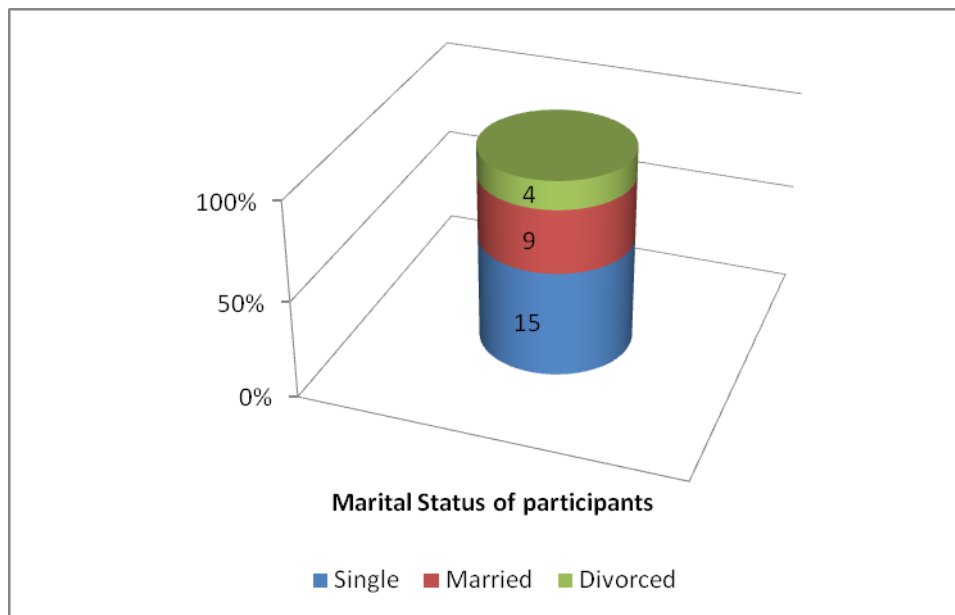


Figure 2: Participants' Marital Status

The big number of singles could mean that they are more active information seekers, while the married women (9) could be looking for information to keep themselves busy so that they do not over think about their families. Alternatively, those women who had babies could be using the library to get toys or books for their babies. From another dimension, the singles could be more interested in reading since they may not be pre-occupied with thinking of their families back home as much as the married women.

b) Awareness of presence of the library

When asked how they knew about the presence of a library in the prisons, 22 out of 28 inmates (80%) said that they would see their fellow inmates with books, mothers and babies having children's literature and dolls and when they got a chance to visit the welfare officer they would see books and magazines on the shelves. This way they would make sure they borrow and read the books. Asked how they accessed books, 15 women (54%) indicated having had access to books they had borrowed through the acting librarian (fellow inmate) while 5 women (18%) indicated accessing the books through being members of the book clubs. Four women (14%) said they accessed books while attending literacy classes where books would be issued out to them. Another four women (14%) said they borrowed the books from their ward mates after seeing them reading at night.

Thus, those who are aware of the presence of the library actually use the chance to access and read the books, or attend literacy classes. This means that awareness of available library services has an influence on use of the library. Naturally, users use services that they are aware of.

c) Benefits of Libraries

Responses on questions on why the women used the libraries and what they benefitted from use of the libraries were related. They were therefore combined in this section. When asked why they used the libraries and how the libraries have empowered them, the women gave

various responses as indicated in the quotes under the headings that follow:

Widen knowledge and understanding - prison libraries offer a variety of information materials such as legal knowledge and realization of human rights which the women use to present themselves while in the courts of law. Legal knowledge obtained plays a great role in inmates pursuing for a fair hearing, as one of the women in Kigo Prison said: *“With the legal knowledge attained from reading law books, I will be able stand tall and defend myself in court for a fair hearing”*

Another woman in Luzira stated that: *“The library polishes the prisoner’s brain to keep updated and informed of the daily happening in the world beyond bars”* while another one said that engaging in reading makes her feel like she is out of the prison cell: *Provision of a conducive atmosphere for revision and personal study that feels less like prison cell.*

Build Confidence and high self-esteem - with the information acquired through reading books, women in the two prisons mentioned having had their self confidence and self-esteem developed through reading books such as biographies of women in high positions, who started from nothing and are now considered influential people in the world. This information empowers female inmates to believe in themselves and not blame themselves for the past mistakes, as one woman in charge of issuing and loaning out books in Kigo mentioned: *“I can't believe am the one now able to stand confidently and translate for my fellow women during big occasion held in prison”*. Through education and information, a female inmate would enhance her self-confidence and self worth, reshaping her way of thinking and attitude towards life.

Health awareness and improvement - HIV/AIDS prevalence in Uganda prisons stands at 11% in male and 13% in female inmates, almost double the national average of about 6.4 % (Uganda Prisons Service and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2009). Prison Libraries provide these women with the necessary information on how to live positively within the tough condition of the prison where access to nutritional supplements and drug supply is limited. The information gained through reading newspapers, magazines and health related books educates the inmates on how to change their lifestyles in order to live better and longer lives. One woman from Kigo said: *I do research on specific topics of interest such as HIV/AIDS and family planning*. Boredom and over thinking about children and families back home may also cause other health complications such as stress and hypertension as one woman in Luzira indicated: *Reading has reduced on stress by not thinking about children and family outside which sometimes results into depression and high blood pressure.*

Boredom and stress management - majority of the inmates interviewed stated that the library enabled them to reduce on the boredom and over thinking. One 37-year old convict in Luzira Prison had this to say: *“An hour spent in prison is like a whole month has elapsed. Having something to read at least keeps me focused for the moment not to think about my children and family back home”*. Over thinking has been linked to depression and development of high blood pressure coupled with stress.

Personal development - through continuous learning and reading, women prisoners increase self awareness and emotional intelligence important for decision making, whether in prison or after incarceration. It makes the women exercise to potentiality and to feel good about themselves. This makes them self-reliant and prepares them to participate in the social system thus reducing on recidivism. Reading newspapers gives them such self esteem: *I keep*

updated and informed on what's going on in the country and abroad by reading a newspaper. Another woman indicated *Socialization with fellow inmates through the book clubs* which is another way of social interaction. To some women, reading and learning has developed their English as one woman in Kigo stated: *Visiting the library has improved me on English vocabulary and grammar through the story books and novels read.* Another one mentioned having ... *developed a reading interest/culture through books read.*

Equipment with entrepreneurial skills - information acquired through reading gives the women income-generating skills such as knitting and making African jewelry out of beads and recycled paper. *When I came to prison I did not know how to knit, but after reading a book on knitting, am now able to make sweaters.* This is a life long learning skill that will help the woman generate income once out of prison.

One inmate and mother had this to say: *I have been able to spend more time with my baby getting to know each other through teaching him how to read.*

The responses indicated that libraries are very important sources of information for the women in prisons regarding their health, social interactions and current news about their country and beyond.

Challenges and recommendations for improved access to the library

Location of the library – the majority of the participants from Luzira Prison expressed great concern that the library facility being outside the perimeter fence made it difficult to access at all times, especially after prison lock up. One has to request for permission and a warden to escort her to the library which limits usage of the facility, as some women are not confident enough to approach the wardens. Re- allocating the library inside the perimeter walls and ensuring it is accessible at all times for continued reading and research was recommended.

Prison work - participants from both prisons faced a challenge of having limited time to read since most of the morning hours are spent working in the prison farms and gardens. This leaves them with late afternoon hours when it is hard for one to concentrate after long hours of work, and when they are feeling hungry. One woman from Kigo prison commented “*it's very hard to focus on reading, after working in the hot sunshine*”. This interferes with literacy classes and book clubs as most of members are unable to attend regularly. This study recommends a reduction in the prison working hours or designing a fixed schedule on some days, for instance weekends where women can do work assigned and other days set aside for literacy classes, personal revisions, research and book clubs.

Language barrier - most of the information materials in both prisons are written in English which the women find a challenge especially the illiterate or those undergoing the functional adult literacy programme. Legal and health literature are usually written in advanced language that readers find hard to comprehend. Having books in Ugandan local languages would be a major step to ensuring women benefit from the services offered by the library. APP should donate more books written in simple English so that the Basic English readers can read and understand. Dictionaries written in local languages translated to English should be added.

Inadequate African literature - the largest library collection are books donated from overseas countries such as Europe and America. These information materials are based on a setting that is quite different from the African context. Some of interviewed women are unable to relate to issues mentioned in the information materials as what they are accustomed to is quite different. Women emphasized a great demand for African writers or books written in the African setting in order to apply their day-to-day lives and feel rehabilitated. Need for more African literature especially by women writers is recommended.

Limited space – In Kigo Prison where they have a book box, there is no provision for sitting and reading the books. Likewise, the library room in Luzira is shared by the welfare office. There is need to provide more space and furniture to ease on reading and revising within the library facility.

Change of Library Assistants (Inmates) - Change of library assistants as the old ones are released hinders the process of borrowing books as the new ones have to first get acquainted to the system.

Separation of babies from mothers - Babies are separated from the mothers most of the hours of the day so it is hard to get more time to read books together and this causes gap between mother and child. More time should be allocated to mothers and their children. This will give the mothers ample time to borrow toys and read books for their children.

As a general recommendation, there is need for improved information literacy sessions for the women inmates, need for more library materials on women empowerment as well as more books on education, recreation and culture.

Conclusion

Libraries and information play a vital role in the empowerment of women in prisons. Women, being the backbone of the country's economy, need to be kept well informed, so that they serve their sentences, they can go out in society with added skills and confidence to meet the challenges of the world.

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