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Understanding Incarcerated Education: A Review of the Digital and Gender Inequality Impacts of Accessibility and Inclusivity of Higher Education for Incarcerated Students

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Abstract: *Education in the correctional environment is endorsed as an effective rehabilitative tool linked to reducing recidivism and improving reintegration. Unfortunately, while researchers from the Global North are particularly active on the subject of the accessibility of digital education in corrections, the same cannot be said for the Global South. Of further concern is that few of the studies conducted have focused specifically on incarcerated women's access to education. As discussed in the literature review to follow, research regarding higher education in corrections has the potential for expanding academics, stakeholders, and policy makers understanding of incarcerated students' pathways towards education attainment. Using an intersectional feminist framework, I argue that there is a need for further research on Global South and gender responsive perspectives on carceral education. Research on the topic can identify opportunities offered and challenges faced, as well as the possible implications for students broader societal functioning post-release.*

Keywords: *Higher education, incarceration, women, students, digital education, Global South*

Introduction

Since the year 2000, the world prison population within the 223 correctional systems outlined by independent countries and dependent territories globally, has grown by approximately 24% (Fair & Walmsley, 2021). While this may present as a slight increase over a period of two decades, it is nonetheless concerning for those researching incarceration as a form of retribution and rehabilitation, with the ultimate goal of incarcerated individuals' successful reintegration into society. Education is often seen as the most effective rehabilitative tool utilised in carceral facilities (Gould, 2018; Haysom, 2015; Payne & Bryant, 2018; Reese, 2019; Tietjen et al., 2018). As a result, countries worldwide have prioritised access to correctional education as a basic human right and in compliance with the United Nations (UN) declarations, Standards and Conventions which include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948; the UN Standard Minimum Rules for Treatment of Prisoners in 1955 and The Mandela Rules in 2015. The role of higher or tertiary level educational attainment in correctional facilities has received increased interest of late (Castro & Gould, 2018; Farley & Willems, 2017; Nowotny et al., 2016; Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017; Vandala, 2019), due to its reported personal

benefits that include higher levels of employment and improved physical and mental health, as well as social benefits of reduced likelihood of incarceration and successful reintegration in communities. Of these, it is the correlation between higher education attainment and recidivism that has garnered the most attention. Yet the role of tertiary correctional education is lauded as moving beyond pedagogical practices that offer incarcerated students' basic literacy and employment post release, towards fostering of social capital where students develop a transformative attitude change of civic competency that enables understandings of their place in society and reduces experiences of stigmatisation and marginalisation (Costelloe, 2014). This paper makes use of an intersectional feminist framework to review available literature on the topic and argues that there is a need for further research on Global South and gender responsive perspectives on carceral education. Accordingly, research regarding higher education in corrections has the potential for expanding understandings of incarcerated students' pathways towards education attainment; to identify opportunities offered and challenges faced in this endeavour, as well as the possible implications for their broader societal functioning post-release. One of the Norwegian Correctional Service's main tasks is to help prevent new crime after sentences are completed, and work and training are among the measures that help prevent incarcerated persons from reoffending (Storvik, 2006; Davis, et al., 2013; Guerrero, 2011; Behan, 2014). This can be understood to mean that the Norwegian Correctional Service's tasks are part of a broader understanding of education and training in prison, and where more actors than just school contribute to the incarcerated persons' learning processes. The actors that are closest to the incarcerated persons in everyday life will have great impact and influence on the incarcerated persons' understanding of and motivation for education and training in prison. However, their understanding of the importance of their professional role regarding incarcerated persons' education and learning processes has hardly been studied. In order to strengthen knowledge in this area, this article will investigate how Norwegian prison officers understand their importance as educational actors through the following research question: How do Norwegian prison officers understand their role as actors in incarcerated persons' education?

Theoretical Framework

When working with students who are incarcerated, it is important to recognise their experiences of multiple discriminations and inequalities. Indeed, researchers worldwide (Artz & Hoffman-Wanderer, 2017; Bradley, 2017; Hanssens et al., 2018; Ondigo & Rono, 2020; Parry, 2022) state that poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism, feature prominently in the daily lived experiences of most women and men prior to their incarceration. Consequently, it is necessary to employ an intersectional approach when comprehending all dimensions of these students identities and lived contexts, incorporating aspects of gender, race, age, and class, as well as interrogating issues of oppression across differing social settings. Intersectionality has proven to be most beneficial to research studies concerned with specific inequalities of the multiply marginalised, both as a theory and methodological paradigm, when examining the interrelated foundations on which broader inequalities are established (Hopkins, 2022). Introduced by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1989) as a critical theory, intersectionality studies how overlapping or intersecting social identities, particularly those of minority groups, are interconnected and related to structures of discrimination when larger oppressive institutions, such as patriarchy, operate together to produce experiences of privilege or marginalisation (Cooper, 2016). In addition, intersectionality emphasises the feminist principle of interdisciplinary engagement, occurring within and across disciplines in reaction to the limitations of single axis frameworks when understanding the social relations of power (Carbado et al., 2013). The literature review for this study has drawn from a wide range of research projects, both intersectional and those that are not necessarily defined as intersectional. However, in the explication of these studies relating to students' experiences of education while incarcerated, this paper considers intersectional confluences of sociocultural factors and intersecting axes of difference, particularly relating to gender and the Global South. As stated by Hopkins (2022),

even well-intended programs and interventions which do not directly address these intersecting vulnerabilities and compounding experiences of sexism, racism, classism, ableism, and other forms of systemic oppression may effectively continue to exclude and silence those positioned as different or disadvantaged (p. 384).

Incarcerated Students in the Global North

China is estimated to have the largest prison population in the world with almost 1.7 million incarcerated individuals, while the Unites States (US) has the highest prison population rate, with a per-capita incarceration rate of 629 individuals incarcerated for every 100,000 residents of their population (Fair & Walmsley, 2021; Wagner & Sawyer, 2018). It is unsurprising then that there has been a resurgence of interest in expanding higher education in US prisons at federal and state levels, in order to improve incarcerated individuals' employment outcomes and reduce recidivism. In 2016, the Research and Development or RAND Corporation commenced with a national and regional landscape scan of higher education in US prisons. The aim of this study conducted by the American non-profit was to recapitulate key trends in carceral higher education in US prisons in order to address the complex problem of mass incarceration in the country. Researchers interviewed numerous stakeholders that included current and former members of the US Departments of Justice (DOJ), prison educators, correctional education administrators and representatives from several state colleges and universities whose higher education programs were considered to be innovative (Davis, 2019). RAND's research findings delineated substantial evidence of the effectiveness of correctional education programs, both in cost to the state and at improving the employment outcomes and recidivism rates for incarcerated students and recommended to policy makers that higher education programs be extended from inside correctional facilities to outside in local communities to encourage desistance upon release (Davis, 2019).

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The incarcerated population in the United Kingdom (UK) is one of the largest in Europe, with a population of approximately 92,678 individuals incarcerated (Fair & Walmsley, 2021). The Open University (n.d.) in the UK has the most incarcerated students registered in long distance higher learning courses at over 150 correctional facilities (Farley et al., 2016). Distance learning at universities offer access to educational courses without physically being on campus and classes taken online, through audio instruction or by mail, which is considered

to be well suited to the conditions of correctional education. Researchers from the Open University state that the formation of a student identity and belonging in a learning community while incarcerated are compelling forces that support incarcerated students improved reintegration into society and reduces the number returning to prison (Pike & Adams, 2012). During a longitudinal study with 51 incarcerated individuals that were due for release from 10 correctional facilities across England and Wales, it was discovered that these students faced immense physical, infrastructural and organisational barriers to learning, but follow up interviews post-release related how the few participants who were able to continue learning after release integrated more successfully into society, prompting her to recommend that policies and practices that support higher learning should be a priority (Pike, 2014).

In France, higher education in correctional facilities is mainly delivered by distance learning with French universities offering complete educational degrees inside correctional centres. In contrast to UK based research, studies conducted amongst French detainees enrolled in tertiary education evidenced that distance education is maladjusted to the correctional context and that need for security and discipline often prevails over the need for education (Salane, 2013). In her research, Salane highlights this paradox and explains how the confrontation of these two discourses create inequality by "transforming access to education into a privilege" (2013, p.1). Students in Australia face similar issues. The country has the largest incarcerated population in Oceania, with 42,403 individuals incarcerated (Fair & Walmsley, 2021). Since 2012, the state corrective services have worked with Australian universities to improve incarcerated students' access to higher education (Farley & Hopkins, 2019). Unfortunately, access to the internet is often prohibited and access to offline digital platforms is only available in certain centres (Hopkins, 2022). One university in Australia sought to confront these challenges of delivering digital higher education to incarcerated students, the University of Southern Queensland, by working with the correctional jurisdictions and is now the largest supplier of higher education in carceral centres in the country and indeed, and one of the largest in the world (Farley & Seymour, 2022). Researchers Farley and Seymour (2022) also report that incarcerated students at enrolled at this university present with both higher retention rates and better results than their non-incarcerated counterparts.

In Nordic countries, the incarceration rate is one of the lowest in the world at on average 56 persons per 100 000 residents of their population (Fair & Walmsley, 2021). Correctional facilities in these countries have incorporated the European Convention on Human Rights of 1953 into their legislation and employ a philosophy of rehabilitation to decrease recidivism that focuses on providing an education for incarcerated individuals which is comparable to that offered to the general public (Manger et al., 2013). Swedish research on the effect of educational attainment on crime that utilised data of 400,000 individuals born between 1943 and 1954 from Sweden's Multigenerational Register, found a significant effect of schooling on incarcerated men that resulted in a recidivism reduction of 15.5% (Hjalmarsson et al., 2015). A study of 750 incarcerated individuals who accessed correctional education in Norwegian carceral facilities found that these students could access university learning platforms outside their facility, communicate directly with lecturers, upload assignments and research online (Manger et al., 2013). In a follow up study with 838 incarcerated students, Manager et al. (2019) found that gender, age, educational level, learning difficulties and length of incarceration sentence influenced student perceptions of barriers to their education.

Qualitative research conducted in correctional facilities in Greece, of which the Hellenic Open University (HOU) is the chief provider, addressed the efficiency of open and distance correctional education in the country's detention centres. In depth interviews conducted with the Women's Prison in Eleonas, found that they are able, under the surveillance, to use the internet and email in order to access websites and to communicate with their professors via email (Linardatou & Manousou, 2015). The researchers noted, however, that while the HOU provides educational opportunities to incarcerated students, its educational policy has no specific strategy regarding distance education and suggests improving the HOU policy towards socially

excluded people such as those who are incarcerated (Linardatou & Manousou, 2015).

Incarcerated Students in the Global South

The carceral environment of the US and England, as well as facilities in the Nordic countries are well researched and documented and are particularly active on the subject of correctional education. Examples of the few Global South countries who have conducted research on the topic includes Turkey, where the rate of incarceration per 100,000 people has risen from 101 to 224 in the ten years from 2006 until 2015 (Farley et al., 2016). The Anadolu University in Turkey has, on average, 1.9 million active students enrolled in a wide range of disciplines and ensures that its courses and programs are accessible to incarcerated students, while aiming "to provide high quality higher education and ensure equity of opportunity in education" (Farley et al., 2016, p. 150). The institution achieves this by employing the latest digital technologies to deliver its programs, but unfortunately the university is unable to fully utilise all of these strategies and technologies for incarcerated students due to limitations imposed through prison regulations that restrict incarcerated students to hard copy study materials such as books, lecture notes and other documents that can be taken from the correctional educator to the open education faculty offices area. (Farley et al., 2016). This is yet another indication of distance learning universities needing to align their policies with the educational practices of correctional facilities, so that students learning is not negatively impacted.

The Open University of Malaysia (OUM) is the only authorised tertiary education provider in correctional centres in the country, where it conducts undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes for incarcerated individuals (Raghavan et al., 2019). A total of 68 incarcerated individuals have registered for OUM programmes since 2019 and research conducted with 67 of these students (63 currently incarcerated and 4 recently released) observed that tertiary education assisted the participants by positively transforming the mindset of those incarcerated and improved the work opportunities of those recently released (Raghavan et al., 2019). A recent qualitative study conducted by Hizwan and Keat (2019) in the Kajang Prison in the Selangor province of Malaysia drew on five participants' experiences and beliefs regarding their lived experiences as incarcerated higher education students. The conclusions drawn regarding the benefits of higher education in correctional facilities found that students attach great value to their studies, with the hope of using it for employment purposes after completion of their sentence, as does the Malaysian government who has permitted their Department of Prisons to start tertiary education for incarcerated individuals in an effort equip them with knowledge and skills to pursue work after their release (Hizwan & Keat, 2019).

In South America, Hirano et al. (2013) interviewed 35 educators from Bolivia, Brazil, and Argentina to ascertain the key elements necessary for the development of policies that would actually give new meaning to educational processes in correctional facilities. They found that the importance of education in corrections as a human right for the incarcerated needs to be noted, particularly for its ability to instil in the student the value of interpersonal relationships, to the development of values and the generation of empathy, as well as feelings of pride, wellbeing, satisfaction and gratitude (Hirano et al., 2014). However, the obstacles that hampered correctional education involved the application of security measures, incarcerated students transfer between facilities, as well as the lack of relevant resources, adequate infrastructure, and appropriate schedules (Hirano et al., 2014).

Unfortunately, even less research concerning incarcerated students' experiences of higher education has been conducted by countries on the African continent. A thorough 2008 review by Sarkin of African correctional facilities notes that

> *Among the many aims of incarceration—retribution, deterrence, public disapproval, incapacitation, rehabilitation, and reintegration—the last two goals remain some of the most elusive and controversial, particularly in Africa. Reha-*

bilitation is a difficult end point for many African prisons to achieve, in large part, due to lack of resources (p. 31).

The somewhat out-of-date review does acknowledge, however, that countries such as South Africa, Uganda and Botswana have endeavoured to improve their rehabilitation programs by focusing on the implementation of educational and vocational training, among others, in order to rehabilitate incarcerated individuals and reintegrate them into the community (Sarkin, 2008). Statistics on incarcerated students in correctional facilities throughout the African continent is limited, but a more recent explication of a few of these is outlined below, each with remarkably varied perspectives on higher education and rehabilitation in corrections in sub-Saharan Africa.

There are some 240 correctional facilities housing just over 72,600 incarcerated individuals in Nigeria, and of these, 98.1% are comprised of men and just 1.9% comprised of women, making the country the fifth largest carceral population total in Africa (Walmsley, 2017). Although not the largest in Africa, Nigeria's correctional facilities are plagued by overcrowding and violence, as noted by their federal government in 2017, who implemented procedures to address the lack of basic human rights provided in their facilities (Ejike-Abuja, 2017). The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) is the largest university in Nigeria with six Study Centres in correctional facilities across the country, but due to financial constraints no student incarcerated individuals are as yet enrolled in higher learning courses (Farley et al., 2016). This, despite the fact that the Study Centres carried out a survey that found that over 3,000 young, incarcerated individuals were eligible, qualified, and willing to enrol in the NOUN programs (Farley et al., 2016). It seems that despite the enthusiasm shown by incarcerated men and women to learn, expansion has been slow-paced owing to lack of outside sponsors as most are indigent prisoners and that state does provide subsidies for incarcerated student enrolment (Farley et al., 2016).

In her 2014 assessment of education in correctional facilities in Zimbabwe, Chigunwe states that although it can be observed that the country has attempted to empower incarcerated individuals in various vocational education programmes, it has not as yet enabled students on the inside to attain the same university degrees or qualifications offered to students on the outside. Appraisal of relevant literature, and interviews with 20 previously incarcerated men, determined that they did not have equal access to adequate higher educational opportunities, even for those who qualified to do such studies (Chigunwe, 2014). Efforts expended towards rehabilitation in Zimbabwean correctional facilities occurred in the form of providing incarcerated individuals access to primary and secondary education as well as access to practical vocational training, partially subsidised by the government, but with students having limited financial support, higher education courses remain unattainable. Chigunwe reports that most correctional facilities in the country do not have required infrastructure for the purposes of higher education and recommends that with increasing opportunities in open and distance learning, such as those offered by the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), the subsidising of correctional education becomes a state priority as it "is almost twice as cost-effective as a crime control policy" (2014, p. 9).

A 2022 qualitative study was conducted by Mdakane et al. with six participants who were incarcerated in a South African correctional facility and studying towards an undergraduate degree. The resulting interview data gained a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of higher education in a South African correctional facility and evidenced that there has been a paradigm shift in the corrections environment, from imprisonment and punishment to rehabilitation (Mdakane et al., 2022). The research clearly indicated that incarcerated individuals are enabled to study, however, students also share lived experiences of the carceral environment as hostile, facing many challenges which impeded on their studies. A more extensive South African study was conducted by Vandala in 2019 with 52 ex-incarcerated individuals who attended correctional education programmes for a period of 2–5 years in two regions of the country, Gauteng and KwaZulu Natal. This mixed methods study gave quantitative and qualitative data

equal status in the research field to better understand the transformative effect of correctional education programmes, especially vocational education, and training programmes, and not specifically that of higher education. Vandala reported that the quantitative findings demonstrated with an overwhelming majority that correctional education transforms incarcerated individuals, with qualitative findings confirming that "correctional education changes behaviour, boosts self-confidence and transforms incarcerated individuals into law-abiding and productive citizens" (2019, p. 12). Furthermore, the study recommends that the state should strive to increase provision of vocational education and training programmes in corrections, to promote incarcerated students' employment and self-sufficiency upon their release (Vandala, 2019).

Accessibility and Inclusivity of Digital Higher Education in the Corrections Environment

"Digital equity is a complex and multifaceted concept. It includes not only access to hardware, software, and connectivity to the Internet but also meaningful, high-quality, and culturally relevant content in local languages, and the ability to create, share, and exchange knowledge. Participatory citizenship in the digital era involves the right to access and participate in higher education. Indeed, it is a key civil rights issue of the modern world" (Willems et al., 2019).

While the transformative effect of higher educational programmes in the correctional environment seems to be universally endorsed, its accessibility and inclusivity is not. It may be that higher education has been linked to reducing recidivism and improving employability post-release, it is, however, also becoming progressively more difficult to facilitate the provision of distance learning in correctional higher education as universities become increasingly dependent on the provision of online delivery for their courses and programmes. The issue of the reliance on digital technologies for the provision of higher education for incarcerated students was addressed by researchers who investigated the delivery of digital higher education in four correctional facilities in Australia, the UK, Turkey, and Nigeria. They found that incarcerated students generally have limited access to digital resources and the internet because risk averse correctional systems often restrict or outright prohibit the use of the internet, computers, and other technologies for incarcerated individuals (Farley et al., 2016).

In the UK, The Prison Reform Trust (PRT) supports digital transformation and recognises that many incarcerated students who are unable to overcome barriers to digital equity will be placed at the far end of the digital divide, neither helped to obtain any of the benefit these new technologies bring nor supported and supervised to avoid its risks, leaving incarcerated individuals woefully unprepared for the real world they will face on release (PRT, 2022). Champion and Edgar (2013) argue that though it is important for security issues to be managed, it is in the nature of technology itself that allows for every key stroke to be monitored and access to be risk-assessed, and state that using information and communication technology (ICT) and the internet as a functional skill is of increasing significance for communication that will allow incarcerated individuals access to public services, research, education, banking and employment after release.

Access to higher education is recognised as one way in which incarcerated individuals could be rehabilitated (Hopkins, 2022) but, in those Australian facilities where incarcerated individuals have access to computer labs, eight or ten computers are networked to an isolated server, with hardware and software out of date and poorly maintained (Farley & Willems, 2017). Nigeria follows a similar tack to Australia, with access to digital technologies and internet access restricted, whilst in Turkey incarcerated students obtain their books, lecture notes and other study materials from the correctional educators, who make regular visits to higher education faculty offices in the province, and who also help their students by using their own internet, mobile phones or other technological equipment to access online educational resources (Farley et al., 2016).

Though Moore (2017) highlights that the participants in the study felt that correctional officers did not support them in their studies, it was acknowledged that South African correc-

tional facilities will, at least, provide a cell, some tables, and chairs for the exclusive use of the incarcerated student. As the largest provider of open distance higher education in South Africa, the University of South Africa (Unisa) has endeavoured to do more for its incarcerated students. In 2014, a collaboration between the South African Department of Correctional Services (DCS) and Unisa resulted in the establishment of educational centres or Unisa Hubs in various correctional centres around the country. The aim is that these hubs will provide administrative support to incarcerated individuals studying through Unisa by offering access to laptops with internet, printers, scanners, Unisa library materials, tutorial services and on-line submission of assignments (Mahlangu, 2017). However, as noted by Mdakane et al. (2022), there are still many challenges faced in the deployment of educational technology for students incarcerated in South Africa, and across the globe (Korzh, 2021; O'Brien et al., 2022; Manger et al. 2019; Willems et al., 2019).

The nature of these challenges is expounded upon by Farley (2022), and categorised as physical challenges, operational challenges, attitudinal challenges, and human challenges. Physical and operational challenges are related to the obvious challenges to accessible digital infrastructure due to environment of correctional centres (lack of space or installation of wi-fi) and support limitations (lack of staff to supervise computer labs). Attitudinal and human challenges are, however, no less challenging. Students seeking to improve their education from behind bars are confronted with biases that perceive this opportunity as a privilege, which many correctional staff or people on the outside are not entitled to, and this is especially true in the case of students studying towards a higher education qualification (Farley, 2022; Mdakane et al., 2022). At the same time, a lack of digital literacy, from both staff and students in correctional centres, is at the heart of human challenges and is a major concern because if digital infrastructures are provided, they may be discarded if staff and students do not know how to use them (Farley, 2022; PRT, 2022). As if all of these challenges faced by incarcerated students attempting to access higher education are not insurmountable enough, a certain cohort confront an even larger issue, that of gendered contests to equitable education behind bars.

Gendered impacts of Higher Education in the Correctional Environment

> *"Women experience prison and engage in education differently. As a result, further research is needed in order to determine whether their needs are being met in prison schools"* (Behan, 2021, p. 91).

As a result of the efforts of feminist researchers and activists an increasing amount of attention is finally being given to the experiences of women involved in the criminal justice system (Zampini et al., 2019). And within the larger picture of education for incarcerated students, one element remains clear - women continue to experience disparities in educational equity (Dean, 2020). This, despite the fact that the rate of incarceration for women continues to rise with over 714,000 women currently being held behind bars worldwide (Ryder, 2020). The Sentencing Project states that "the rate of growth for female imprisonment has been twice as high as that of men since 1980" (2020, p.1). Across the Asian continent there has been a dramatic 50% increase, and in Central and South America, there has been a 19% increase of women's incarceration rates, whilst the rate in Caribbean has remained constant and in Europe, it has decreased by 29% (Lenihan, 2020). Much like their incarcerated male population, America constitutes the largest percentage of the total of women who are incarcerated. Indeed, the US women's state prison populations have more than doubled compared to the rate of male population advances since 1978 (Tietjen et. al, 2018). In Africa, the rise has been somewhat less than the increase in the general population of incarcerated women, with the smallest justice-involved women populace globally at an average of only 3% (Walmsley, 2017). The Seychelles is the exception of this average, with highest number of incarcerated women in Africa at 34.8 per 100,000 of the national population, followed by Rwanda at 29.6, and then a significant drop in the next highest of the Republic of Cabo Verde at 11.4 (Walmsley, 2017). Countries in the Southern African region are more representative of the 3% average, with Namibia, Bo-

tswana, and Swaziland all falling below that percentage. This average is also representative for South Africa, where the DCS reports that as of March 2021 2,334 sentenced and 1,390 unsentenced women in correctional facilities across the country (Department of Correctional Services [DCS], 2022).

In 2011, recognition of a growing awareness of the differential impact of incarceration on women resulted in the gender-sensitive UN Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (also known as the Bangkok Rules). In the Bangkok Rules, specific mention is made of education for women and programmes that take gender-appropriate needs into account. Unfortunately, incarcerated women are not only defined by their carceral state, but they also represent a minority, with research indicating that women represent a small fraction of the correctional population, often less than 6 per cent (Mangan, 2023; Sawyer, 2018; Walmsley, 2017). This is reflected in carceral systems that are predominantly male, where education programs that are male-centric leave women undereducated and unprepared for release. In the US, women's prison programs are often based on male models, and, thus, are less likely to focus on gender-specific issues (Tietjen et al., 2018) making women a vulnerable gendered minority of an already relegated community and thus are arguably all the more marginalised. The South African DCS (2019) reports that the National Skills Fund (NSF) has funded training for 5 480 incarcerated individuals on various vocational and occupational skills programmes. Yet, in their partnership with the Services Sector Education and Training Agency (SETA), they account for having only trained 44 women in hairdressing within the Johannesburg management area. This, despite the mention of a motor vehicle drivers training programme for incarcerated women, for which they do not elaborate on the number of participants (DCS, 2019). As Chigunwe explicated in her 2014 study in Zimbabwe, incarcerated women are taught income generating skills, but they are often gendered along traditional lines to include homemaking activities such as sewing, bread making etc. Linardatou and Manousou's (2015) survey of two correctional facilities in Greece found that only one 30-year-old incarcerated woman at the Women's Prison in Eleonas, Thebes, had managed to "break" the chains of incarceration after sitting for the national university-entrance exams from within a correctional facility.

Unfortunately, very little research is available on the motivations of women students' enrolment when incarcerated. One comparative research study in the US by Rose and Rose (2014) studied the participation of incarcerated men and women in correctional higher education programs, with the most significant predictor of incarcerated women's participation in higher educational programming dependent on whether they received visits from their children. For those women who did, 65.3% were more likely to participate in higher educational programming (Rose & Rose, 2014). This finding was confirmed by an Australian study which interviewed 31 incarcerated women across two correctional facilities regarding their motivations and barriers to enrolling in correctional education programs (Spark & Harris, 2005). The researchers found that women's participation in such programs served to provide a sense of hope for the future and/or as a strategy to connect with family members on the outside, and not specifically with the intention of improving their employment prospects. Rather, as substantiated by the literature, their motivation circled back to their roles as mothers. Spark and Harris (2005) recommended that for correctional education to be truly effective, it must recognise that incarcerated mothers pursue such programmes to re-establish healthy, loving relationships with their children first, and that concerns of employment come second. A more recent appraisal of the Boston University's (BU) Prison Education Program, which was conducted with four incarcerated women who are students enrolled in higher educational programmes and three correctional educators, confirmed that the program helped to motivate the students to work toward other life goals and fostering the capacity to take an active part in their lives post-incarceration, but most importantly, the women saw education as a tool for reconnecting with family (Baranger et al., 2018).

Few studies of correctional higher education programmes have focused specifically

on women, and in reality, not many such programs exist, resulting in incarcerated women's uneven access to these programmes across facilities globally (Castro 2018; Dewey et al., 2019; Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017). It can be seen that even as the numbers of women in prison are growing, incarcerated women are greatly underserved by prison university programs, with traditional notions of femininity and domesticity informing the programs offered, rather than providing "female offenders access to education opportunities that will expand their economic prospects for themselves and their families" (Ginsburg, 2019, p.8). Within the space of correctional facilities, gender norms are often institutionally re-produced as certain forms of masculinity and femininity are expected, and this impacts on all aspects of incarcerated women's experience, including access to higher education (Zampini et al, 2019). Incarcerated women may face unique barriers to higher educational attainment compared to their male counterparts or may be instructed in correctional education programs that are irrelevant to their successful re-entry, overlooking women's personal and social consequences of recidivism. Successful desistance and community re-entry for men has been noted to depend on a range of factors, including a person's need for employment, education, housing, physical and mental health, substance use treatment, and connection with families, among others (Davis, 2019; Farley & Willems, 2017; Hirano et al., 2013; Hizwan & Keat, 2019). Situating higher learning programmes in the gendered context of corrections necessitates the consideration of the interactions of structural inequality in race, class, and gender. It is generally accepted that women follow particular gendered pathways to incarceration and become involved in conflict with the law differently than men do (Artz et al., 2012; Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2013; Parry, 2022; United Nations [UN], 2013; Yenjela, 2015; Yingling, 2016;). Women's pathways to incarceration are most often preceded by higher levels of physical and sexual abuse as children and adults, lower levels of employment, higher levels of homelessness and financial insecurity, as well as higher levels of substance abuse and mental health issues when compared to their male counterparts (Parry, 2021). Moreover, women are more likely than men to be the primary caregivers to their children, often the only caregiver as single parents, who then attempt to 'mother from the inside' with inadequate services to do so (Enos, 2000). Socially structured inequalities relating to gender add to the burdens that women experience upon re-entry compared to men. Taking these variances into consideration, it is not unreasonable to expect that their need for, and experiences of, higher education while incarcerated my differ from those of incarcerated men. It is important that researchers, stakeholders, and policy makers understand the carceral educational experience through the lens of gender. This will reaffirm the importance of incarcerated women's full, equal, and meaningful participation in higher education in order to close the gender gap related to access and use of technologies, connectivity, digital literacy and education (UN Women, 2023).

Discussion

> *"The appeal and promise of higher education in prison must be to help create actors and conditions that can, at least to some degree, effectively challenge and hopefully alter oppressive conditions for the better. This includes conditions both inside and outside the prison walls. Higher education can promote this by enhancing and encouraging individual and collective self-determination and throwing open the door to the knowledge, skills, networks, and resources necessary to build just communities and democratic societies"* (McCorkel & DeFina, 2019).

As seen from the literature reviewed, questions of knowledge applicability and digital accessibility, as well as a gender responsive understanding of student-centred application of learning and teaching in corrections, needs to be considered in order to engage in ethical pedagogical and research practices that do not undermine the knowledge and agency of the marginalised correctional community. Despite the many challenges faced by correctional facilities the world over: overcrowding, limited resources in healthcare and education, as well as the difficult

conditions that correctional officers and educators have to work under, it is still of vital importance that research raises awareness and understanding of the complex social, cultural, and political barriers faced by incarcerated students enrolled in higher education programmes. If the digital divide is allowed to grow between those who are incarcerated and their communities, it will continue to widen as rapidly as technologies are evolving and cause resettlement for incarcerated individuals to be even more difficult as an isolated and relegated population. It is necessary then that research uncovers to what extent higher education and access to information and communications technology (ICT) could benefit incarcerated individuals' rehabilitation and what more could be done to use higher education and access to ICT to reduce recidivism. There is enormous potential to use higher education programmes and controlled internet access as a tool to improve not only incarcerated individuals' rehabilitation and recidivism, but to promote community and family ties by maintaining social interaction with peers, families, and others. The role of staff ICT skills and its impact on incarcerated individuals distance learning in higher education should also be clarified, to ensure the maximum benefit of higher education distance and e-learning initiatives for incarcerated individuals as non-traditional and isolated students.

While reduced recidivism is a desired outcome, the benefits of higher education for incarcerated individuals and their successful community re-entry involves not only economic participation, but meaningful social participation as well. Extensive research (Dewey et al. 2020; Gender, Health and Justice Research Unit [GHJRU], 2012; Mushtaq & Yasin, 2021; Ostini & Farley, 2022) on the impact of education, particularly higher education, on incarcerated individuals' lives demonstrates both individual and societal benefits. The benefits can include personal and family wellbeing (e.g. self-esteem and cognitive ability), empowerment to make informed choices, higher chances of employment and reintegration to society (Korzh, 2021). For women, specifically, research has found that education as a resource contributed towards the development of women's capabilities to value their individual agency, improve interpersonal relationships, and even reduce their experiences of gender inequality (Walker, 2006). Often, the motivation to participate in and complete higher learning degrees "went beyond the course context, involving a search for community, a way to pass the time, and the benefits of the simple act of thinking." (Berry, 2018, p. 95). This is especially important for incarcerated women whose experiences differ vastly when compared to those of incarcerated men, as outlined in the literature where women students' capacity and motivation for higher learning is strongly influenced by their families. Higher education may offer opportunities for women that do not directly or obviously link to desistance, but nevertheless allow them to develop capabilities that they deem helpful in supporting their re-entry with their families and communities after incarceration. If higher education in corrections can contribute by fostering social capital as much as human capital, it can facilitate significant life changes by enabling incarcerated individuals to make choices that maximise their human potential and expand their sense of a social responsibility and humanity (Costello, 2014). Through maintaining an intersectional focus, distance learning universities can contribute much to developing an understanding of the ways in which they can build the capabilities of their most marginalised students and understand the role of higher education in development of inclusion and equity (Tait, 2013). Though the carceral system traditionally does not encourage incarcerated men and women to challenge the existing social order, many higher education "programs facilitate their students becoming advocates of peace, justice, social engagement, taking action to challenge individual and institutional violence, becoming spokespersons for their communities, and succeeding where the system had told them they were failures." (Behan, 2021, p. 46).

Research concerning the benefits of higher education for incarcerated women re-entering their communities is scarce. Yet women who are incarcerated face incomparable re-entry issues due to dominant cultural expectations that women are passive, altruistic, and obedient. Incarcerated women violate all of these gendered cultural norms and once released face a myriad of challenges with respect to employment, housing, and resource access due to the signifi-

cant stigma that surrounds their convictions and traditional gender role contraventions (Dewey et al., 2019). The distinctively gendered challenges they encounter are compounded by the reality that the majority of incarcerated women are mothers of young children, that women often earn less money than men, and that women are more likely than men to be victims of intimate partner violence (Dewey et al., 2019). However, those few studies conducted on the benefits of higher education for women who are incarcerated (Baranger et al., 2018; Brown & Bloom, 2017; Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017) indicate that there is a causal link to reduced recidivism rates. Although these women face unique barriers as they return to the community, it is plausible that the benefits of education generally and higher education specifically for incarcerated women and their families are even greater than for men, when women's pathways to justice involvement are considered (Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017). The importance of research regarding incarcerated women lies within the particularities of their lived experiences, which includes poverty, sexism, racism, familial separation and violence. An intersectional framework is most appropriate when assessing the educational needs of incarcerated women because pathways to incarcerated are not only classed, gendered, and racialized but also intersect with experiences of disability, sexualities, mental illness, ethnicity, and nationality (Hopkins, 2022). Geographically, these disparities exist as well, with very little focus given to incarcerated students (both men and women) of the Global South, nor their experiences of individual and social marginalisation. As stated by Tormos (2017), intersectional solidarity can transcend not only interpersonal differences but disciplinary, institutional, and territorial boundaries as well. Though gaps in the literature regarding incarcerated students' digital equity (most specifically women pursuing higher education within the Global South) persist as academic silences, this paper evidences how shared knowledge and intersectional perspectives can provide a basis for social connection, cutting across group differences while still recognising differences in relation to the intersections of their identities and lived experiences (Tormos, 2017). With its emphasis on diversity and multiculturalism, intersectional perspectives can reflect differences in terms of higher education access and digital experiences between men and women as well as the Global North and South. This can encourage carceral educational development that is more inclusive, which moves beyond recidivism motivations to improve student well-being whilst incarcerated and prosocial reengagement post-release (Batastini, et al., 2022).

Conclusion

The complexity of identities with which people enter into incarceration largely remains unaddressed in educational settings (Dean, 2020). Overcoming barriers to education for incarcerated students, as well as the identity, bias and diversity issues faced when completing any form of formal or informal education in the carceral context, requires resilience and innovative ways of navigating such adversities (Farley et al., 2019). Despite the higher education opportunities presented for incarcerated students through digital platforms, many students experience insurmountable challenges when attempting to complete their studies. Studying while incarcerated requires a large support system that includes correctional staff, such as educators and correctional officers; academic staff, including supervisors, lecturers, and tutors; and the student's family members as well. Through sheer determination, self-motivation and a support network, incarcerated students, much like their fellow scholars on the "outside", are able to achieve remarkable, life altering results. It is an imperative to consider the meaning of truly accessible and inclusive digital higher education through research in correctional facilities. The development and facilitation of a student-centred pedagogical approach must be relevant to the everyday materiality of the lives of incarcerated student incarcerated individuals and their families. Said relevance contributes to not only curbing recidivism and improving employment prospects, but in promulgating the capabilities of these students so that they may cultivate healthy individual and social functioning within themselves, their families and local communities.

Yet, Batastini et al. (2022) warns against the "hollow intersectionality rhetoric" outlined

by Masri (2019), where calls to consider intersectionality are made without supporting action. This can be seen in the research reviewed, where higher educational in correctional facilities has been lauded as the only measure of true rehabilitation due to its reported personal benefits that include higher levels of employment and improved physical and mental health, as well as social benefits of reduced likelihood of incarceration and successful reintegration in communities. However, literature that considers intersectional experiences thereof is very limited, and recommendations that outline intersectional interventions, even more so. In a small way, I have attempted to heed this call by not only centring literature from the Global South, but women's experiences as well. I have also practiced the promotion of person-centred language, avoiding damaging and labelling language like "criminal", "offender" and "inmate", to highlight these individuals as women (and men) who are students pursuing an education under extremely challenging circumstances.

Similarly, correctional departments and policy stakeholders need to consider the impact of punitive measures on incarcerated students, against the benefits of a more intersectional, holistically conceived and gender-responsive model of prison education that is socially restorative (O'Brien et al., 2022). Batastini et al. (2022) calls for correctional service providers to consider the role of broader systems in perpetuating criminal justice contacts, acknowledging that their justice involvement can be compounded by pre-existing cultural and/or socioeconomic disadvantages. Ryder (2020) recommends interdisciplinary action by creating community partnerships between stakeholders, such as establishing links between academia and correctional departments, as this is essential for building sustainable higher educational programs for incarcerated students. It would also be prudent to make higher education accessible online with adequate technological infrastructure as a low-cost option that is scalable to extend reintegration support to a broader cohort (Grierson et al., 2022; Palmer et al., 2020). Additionally, governments should cogitate increasing funding for women aspiring to higher education while in prison, considering the unequal social, economic, and familial factors that impact on a woman's pathways to incarceration (Parry, 2021). In short, higher education in correctional facilities should prioritise an interdisciplinary orientation towards education that is of a sustainable design and educational practice, focusing on the formation of socially aware and responsible citizens upon their release. Unfortunately, these shift in policy will not happen overnight if societies continue to ostracise incarcerated individuals and so it is important that research deconstructs the national public discourse to shift societal attitudes towards rehabilitation and away from punishment. As stated by Korzh (2021), there is so much we can learn from those "women who overcome the odds and achieve success in life by contributing to the overall development of their country" (p.16).

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