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Women Offenders in Kenya: Addressing the Psychological Needs Towards Effective Rehabilitation

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<p>Chief Editor Web: www.ijfdc.org Email: info@ijfdc.org</p> <p>Editing Oversight Imperials Consultants International Limited</p>	<p>Abstract: Women offenders unique psychological needs explaining their offending behaviors. Understanding their needs ensures effective rehabilitation. This study sought to find out the psychological needs of women prisoners in Kenya. Risk-Needs-Responsivity (RNR) Model for Offender Rehabilitation and Relational Theory of Women's Psychological Development informed the study. The study adopted cross-sectional and descriptive research designs, employing mixed concurrent triangulation method of data collection. The target population included all convicted women within the 17 prisons in Kenya. A sample of 350 women participated in the study. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics method while textual thematic analysis was used for qualitative data. The study revealed that majority of women offenders' criminal behaviors was influenced by: histories of physical abuse- 46.8% in childhood and 51.3% in adulthood; post-traumatic stress disorder indicated 78.95%. Parental distress due to financial constraint was 62.6% and 87% were constantly worried about their children's future. Understanding these needs influence effective rehabilitation.</p> <p>Keywords: Women prisoners, offending, unique psychological needs, assessment, rehabilitation, treatment</p>
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1.1 Introduction

Women in the criminal correctional facilities continue to grow. According to (Institute for Criminal Policy Research, 2018) (ICPR) the increase in the female imprisonments across the globe is a cause of worry with the faster growth rate surpassing that of male offenders. The increasing numbers on incarceration of women is a trend that need to be contained considering its adverse effects on families and society at large. In all societies, women are the backbones of families with defined roles that are

threatened by their absence. Women's imprisonment often brings suffering to their children and indeed the entire family. Ackermann (2016) describes a scenario where a significant number of women in prison are mothers and often, the sole or primary caregiver of children prior to detention. The true impact of female detention is felt by children who are imprisoned with their mothers, or who remain alone on the outside. Although, Africa records the lowest number of women in the world total population; approximated at 18 percent, concerns on the rising numbers of women being incarcerated Africa (National Institute of Drug Abuse, 2018; Ackermann, 2016).

There are limited studies on female incarceration in Kenya while data remains scanty with the exact numbers of incarcerated women unclear. According to Onyango-Israel (2013) the numbers of women in the Kenyan prisons increased from 10,857 in 2004 to 18,112 in 2012. Similarly, while acknowledging an inevitably incomplete picture, ICPR (2018) reported an increase of approximately 3% of women incarcerated in the Kenya women prisons between 2009 and 2016. According to Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (2017) (KEBS) survey on economic there were about 10, 644 convicted women prisoners, thus reported to have been a relatively smaller number compared to their male counterparts that was 71, 789 male prisoners from the Survey. Out of the 17 prisons in Kenya, two of these are maximum prisons housing the capital offenders.

It is for this plight that this study investigates the specific psychological needs of women offenders in Kenya. According to Ondeng et al. (2020) the psychological needs identified attribute to women pathway to criminality and therefore an important consideration for effective rehabilitation. The study was informed by mainly two reasons. First, it was because of the growing numbers of women offenders in the Kenyan prisons and second, it was a response to the previous global studies by feminist criminologists and psychologist working within the criminal justice system for systematic investigation on why women commit criminal offenses, ending up in incarceration. Ondeng (2018) suggest that practitioners need to develop theoretical perspectives and approaches through academic investigation on gender influence in criminality, explanations for women's criminal tendencies, requirements of female prisoners that would lead to their effective rehabilitation and reintegration to the society. The scholar believes that women have distinct reasons for their criminal behaviors that differ from their male counterparts (Ondeng, 2018; Ondeng et al., 2020).

On this note Zorc-Mayer and Zrim- Martinjak (2013) lament the global trend in the development of criminological theories that continue to neglect the concept of female criminality. Similar sentiments are echoed by Bilgram and Nasreen (2023) blaming the lack of focus on women's pathways to offending on the notion that men commit majority of crimes than women. The challenge now is to create a new and courageous path for understanding and dealing with women's crime towards effective rehabilitation, reduction in recidivism and reintegration into the community.

1.2 Literature Review

In this section, theoretical framework and empirical literature reviews will be presented.

1.2.1 Theoretical framework

The study was guided mainly by Relational Theory of Women's Psychological Development by Miller (1976) and colleagues (Gilligan, 1982; Jordan, 1985; Kaplan, 1984; and Surrey, 1985). Relational theory denotes that "connections" is a critical developmental need in human beings, but more

importantly to women. Thus, according to Miller (1976), a woman’s growth is manifested through the types of relationships she has, and her sense of self-worth is defined by interconnections with others. Therefore, without healthy connections in their relationships, women’s positive growth and self-worth are eroded making them highly vulnerable to criminal behaviors (Jespersen, 2006; Trotter, Mclover & Sheehan, 2012).

Victimization and dysfunctional relationships in women’s lives and more pronounced in women offenders’ lives are issues addressed within the framework of relational theory. Such disturbed relationships and abuses in women’s lives contribute to lack of empathy, distress and low self-esteem attributed to criminal behaviors such as fraud, substance use and abuse, among others (Covington, 2007; Salisbury, 2007; Van Voorhis, 2013). While determining the psychological needs of women offenders in view of effective rehabilitation the current study considers important a major component of The Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) Model of Offender Rehabilitation developed by Andrews & Bonta (2003); a model noted in literature to have dominated corrections across the globe. The R-N-R theory’s emphasis on the critical need for assessment of offenders’ risks and needs using validated instruments would be a component that would build up the principal theory of this study, that is, the relational theory of women’s psychological development. A major component in addressing the psychological needs of women offenders would entail helping them to build positive relationships in their lives, promoting the concepts of restorative justice and creating mentorship programs for them.

Figure 1 below shows how the relational theory of women’s psychological development would promote ideas towards effective rehabilitation and treatment of women offenders of women offenders in Kenya.

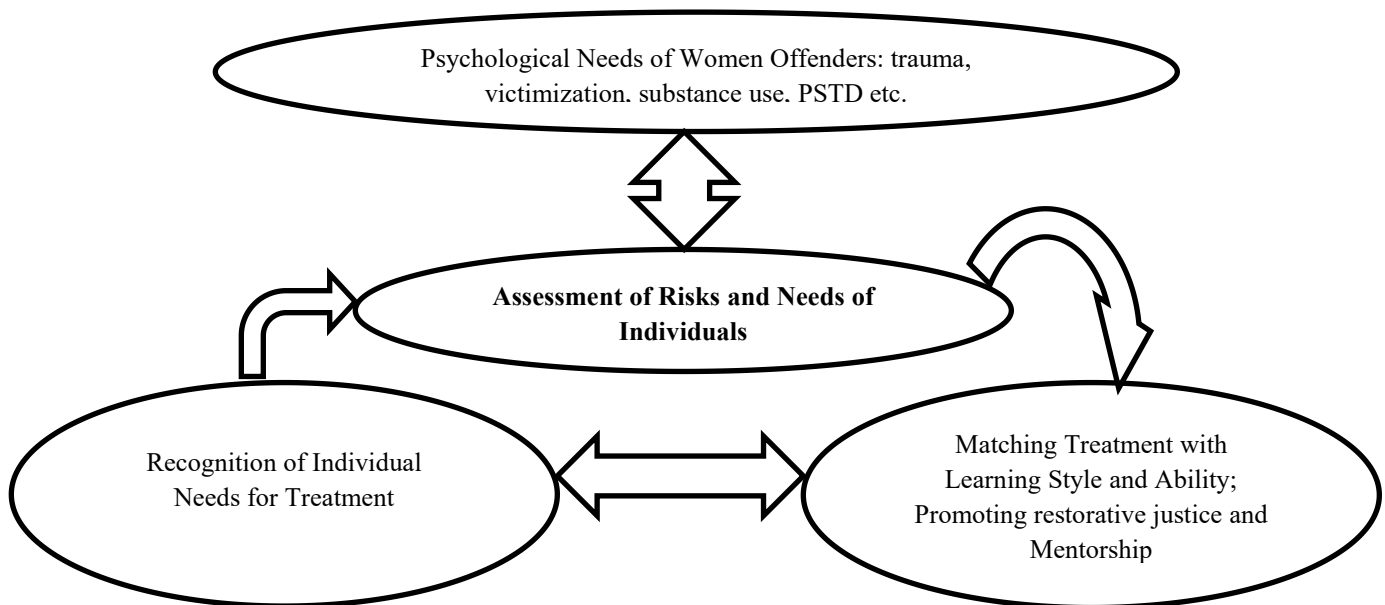


Figure 1 : Illustration of the Relational Theory of Women’s Psychological Needs in View of Addressing Psychological Needs of Women Offenders Towards Effective Rehabilitation

1.2.2 Empirical literature review

Understanding the Unique Psychological Needs of Women Offenders

Developmental psychologists explain normative life events among other lifespan perspectives as critical to one's successful or unsuccessful development. Most of the psychological needs that affect cognitive, moral and social development of women fall within the scope of normative life events. These events are those that affect some individuals within a group or age cohort Kousha et al. (2013), unlike normative history graded or normative age graded influences that are defined within a group. In addition, histories of victimization; physical or sexual, are major traumatic psychological experiences that could influence criminality among women (Holtfreter and Morash 2008; Van Voorhis, 2013; Hollin & Palmer, 2006). The scholars posit that physical, emotional or sexual abuses have effects on the psychological wellbeing of the victims as most of them are traumatic in nature. If not treated as often as the case the effects impinge on the cognitive development of the victim (Belknap, 2014; Brown, et al., 2009).

Traumatic events associated with victimization ordinarily affect the cortex which is the part of the brain that coordinates thinking and planning (Rothschild, 2000). It is this effect of the brain that contributes to one becoming vulnerable to criminal activities such as drug use, self-injury and suicidal tendencies. Such negative tendencies are acted out as a means of numbing the pains related to their traumatic experiences (Covington & Bloom, 2006; Brown et al., 2009). Emotionally abused women are prone to depression, moodiness and extreme or dulled emotional responsiveness. The effect of such abuse damages a victim's trust in herself, perception and sanity. In some cases, the abused women may become abusers themselves, although this is not always the case (Agnew, 2002). Brown et al. (2009) show a close association between victimization and drug abuse in women offenders. The emotional turmoil of abuses in women offenders is a major cursor to drug or alcohol use as a way of managing their emotional distress or numbing their pains of trauma (Messina, Burdon, & Prendergast, 2003). This explains women offenders' difficulties in self-reflection and irrationality in dealing with their emotions (Chesney-Lind 1997; Agnew, 2002) hence committing crimes.

Parental distress in women offenders is linked to lack of preparedness in parenting roles and failure to handle parental responsibilities (Byrne & Howells 2002). Conceptually, parental distress refers to the combination of negative emotional distress such as depression, anxiety and stress (Hollin & Palmer, 2006). Parental distress could be precursor for female offending such as child molestation, child neglect, drug addiction and fraud for survival purposes, suggesting the need to equip women with parental skills (Wright, et al., 2008). Considering the roles society assigns to women as home makers, mothers, nurturers and the backbones of many families the call towards the development of rehabilitation programs that not only addresses women's psychological needs but equally celebrates their uniqueness as women is timely information for the Kenya government, correctional department and the society at large.

Dysfunctional relationships in women's lives is a psychological need and thus a factor that seem to explain criminality in women offenders. According to Ogembo (2019) women's distress associated to dysfunctional relationships often results into criminal behaviors such as assault and murder or substance abuse. This is often a way that women employ as a survival strategy in numbing the pains of the disturbed relationships. In some cases, substance abuse is used to maintain relationships (Van

Voorhis, 2013; Blanchette & Tylor, 2009). For example, Mutemi (2017) in an interview with women offenders revealed that women commit criminal acts to secure a partner's needs, in the face of abandonment or abuse, these women turn to criminal activity. Moreover, a plethora of studies on women and criminal reveal that criminal activities among women offenders in Africa and Kenya in general are due to use and abuse of substance (Oketch, 2006; Luyt, 2008; Othieno et al., 2011).

Furthermore, closely related to empowerment, low self-esteem and low self-efficacy in women associated to their low status in society, social stigma, histories riddled with abuse, addiction and negative relationships are other issues associated with criminality in women (Salisbury et al., 2006). These scholars equate self-esteem and self-efficacy to financial empowerment thus creating a sense of control in one's life to complete certain goals. Although studies done mostly in male population show that incorporating self-esteem has little effect particularly in predicting recidivism (Andrews & Bonta, 2003), women may have a different perspective. Salisbury (2007) contends that a ruined self-esteem based on life circumstances such as de-empowerment, dysfunctional abusive relationships and oppression by a society contribute to women inability to meet their basic needs and those of their families. This in return explains behaviors such as drug use, fraud and rage in women offenders. This study sought to establish psychological issues contributing to criminality in women offenders in Kenya. The knowledge is critical towards the effective rehabilitation and treatment of the women offenders during incarceration. These include victimization and traumatic experiences in the lives of women.

Studies suggest that unless the unique psychological needs of women offenders are clearly understood and taken into consideration, the success in rehabilitation may not be as effective (Kipkemboi, 2023; Mutemi, 2017; Sang, 2022). Notably, however, the approach in rehabilitation in many developing countries as suggested in the current study seems to be focuses on economic empowerment with minimal attention to psychological issues. Casual observation indicates that spirituality is a major component in rehabilitation facilities. Most rehabilitation practices across the globe are modeled on studies of pioneer scholars in the field of modern correctional policy (Andrews & Bonta, 2003) who opined that offending behaviors were caused by social factors, specifically illiteracy, poverty and unemployment. And therefore, the rehabilitation of offenders has to focus on skills that would lead into formal or self-employment. In view of this model, rehabilitation of offenders in general tend to focus on issues of pro-criminal attitudes and values, criminal associates, antisocial personality, antisocial behaviors leaving out major issues for women offenders (Jespersen, 2006; Ward & Stewart, 2003). Contemporary feminist psychologist and scholars e.g. (Van Voorhis and Salisbury, 2014; Holtfreter and Morash 2008; Hollin & Palmer, 2006) observe that rehabilitation of female offenders cannot be effective if their distinct psychological needs are not taken into consideration during rehabilitation. The implication being that female offenders will remain prone to re-offending and, re-incarceration.

1.3 Methods

The study was conducted within the women's correctional facilities across the 47 counties in Kenya. The target population for this study constituted all the women prisoners in the 17 major women prisons in Kenya with a minimum of class 8 education level. The sample size compromised 350 women offenders, 3 prison officers-in-charge, 3 officers of non-governmental organizations (NGOs,) 3 officers of Faith Based Organizations (FBOs) and the director of rehabilitation and social welfare. Simple random sampling technique was employed in sampling both the women prisons and the women offenders while the officers were purposively. Questionnaire, face to face interviews and focus group

discussion employed to collect data on psychological needs of women and effective rehabilitation. The age range was between 25 and 65 years. The questionnaires were mainly adopted from the standard tools. The Rosenberg (1965) scale was used to measure the level of self-esteem of the respondents and the Generalized Self-Efficacy scale by Schwarzer and Jerusalem (1995) to measure the level of self-efficacy among women prisoners in Kenya. A team of clinical and counseling psychologists worked on the original tools to ensure that the language of the questions was culturally fit for the respondents without altering the meaning of the questions. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics while qualitative data was analyzed thematically. In ethical consideration and concerns, permission was sought from the relevant authorities from the national to the sub-locational level. Similarly, informed consent was sought from the participants who took part in the study. Moreover, confidentiality and anonymity were assured and observed during data collection and management.

1.4 Findings of the study

The findings of the study established that women have various psychological needs that made them vulnerable to criminality. The needs were both personal and relational. These are presented below:

Victimization (Physical and Sexual Abuse) and Trauma

The existing literature shows that victimization can make individuals prone to criminality. The study therefore sought to establish whether women in correction institution in Kenya had experienced victimization. To test whether women offenders were victims of abuses, the respondents were asked to respond to whether they had been victimized by giving a 'yes' or 'no' vote. Table 1 shows the summary of response on victimization among the respondents.

Table 1: Victimization (Physical and Sexual Abuse) and Trauma

Victimization	Yes	No
Physical abuse as a child	46.8%	53.2%
Physical abuse as an adult	51.3%	48.7%
Sexual abuse as a child	6.7%	93.3%
Sexual abuse as an adult	18.2%	81.8%

Source: (Researcher, 2024)

The study found that an average number of respondents were victims of physical abuse either as children (46.8%) or adults (51.3%); while 6.7% and 18.2% of the respondents had been sexually abused as children and adults respectively. This finding was corroborated with qualitative data as exemplified by the quote below:

He is a devil! (referring to her husband). He comes home drunk and late in the night shouting and threatening to kill me. He demands food when he does not leave behind money to buy the food. If he does not get the food, he wants he will just start fighting and beating me up. It was one of those nights, he came after midnight and started demanding that I serve him meat and no vegetables. Since I did not provide him with the plate of meat, he started fighting me. He then removed a knife from his pocket wanting to kill me. In the process of our fight, I overpowered him, and I took the knife from him. I stabbed him in self-defense and unfortunately, he died. That is why I am here" (WPL3, 2024).

As captured in the quote these words suggest that the inmate was exposed to both physical and emotional abuse, making her commit crime of murder that led to her incarceration.

Studies have shown that mental illness that may be a factor to relate to criminality in women offenders in Kenya. The study assessed PTSD as a complication of untreated trauma in women offenders. PTSD has been associated with criminality in women. Muthoni and Ndeti (2013) while examining the undiagnosed Psychiatric Morbidity among Remand Prisoners in Kenya, recommended an assessment and treatment of PTSD among other mental illnesses in inmates. The result on PTSD in the current study is shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: PTSD (Reflection on a horrible/Frightening experience that has lasted more than a month)

PTSD Indicator	Yes	No
Trauma or actual harm outside normal range	87.6%	12.4%
Recurrent disturbing dreams, recollections	82.1%	17.9%
Avoidance of troubling memories	61.0%	39.0%
Marked diminished interest	73.5%	26.5%
Unwanted images, “flashbacks”	87.0%	13.0%
Automatic over-reactivity	82.5%	17.5%
Average score	78.95%	21.05%

Source: (Researcher, 2024)

The items above on Table 2 representing trauma acronym summarizing the PTSD key features (Zukerman, 2005) show that on average 78.95% of the respondents scored ‘yes’ to questions that were measuring PTSD while 21% of the respondents said ‘no.’ The study therefore found that majority of the respondents exhibited PTSD symptoms that may qualify the DSM-5 (2013) diagnostic criteria.

Parental Distress in Women Prisoners

To establish whether parental distress related to parental role was a psychological need that contributed to criminality amongst women offenders, the respondents were presented with various items (n = 6), against which they were supposed to indicate their status in providing for the needs of their children in responding to their parenting role. The quantitative and qualitative findings on this variable are concurrently presented, discussed and analyzed. Table 3 shows the results of the study.

Table 3: Parental Distress

Parental Distress Indicator	Yes	No
Respondents with children of age 18 and below	83.4%	16.6%
Financial ability to provide basic needs (food, clothing and shelter)	37.4%	62.6%
Financial ability to provide good education and health care	40.5%	59.5%
Constant worry on children’s future due to inability to provide basic needs	87%	13%
Constant worry due to inability to provide children’s educational needs	85.1%	14.9%
Receiving support from father of child/children in meeting needs	31.7%	68.3%

Source: (Researcher, 2024)

The findings on Table 3 show that 83% of the respondents had children of age 17 and below who were dependent mainly on the respondents for their basic needs and thus survival. On financial ability, 62.6% were unable to provide basic needs for their children, while 59.5% did not have the ability to provide good education and health care for their children. Majority of the respondents (87%) were worried about their children’s future due to their inability to provide their basic needs, while 85.1% worried about their inability to provide their children with education. On support, 68.3% reported a lack of support from their spouses in meeting the needs of their children. This was corroborated by qualitative data as shown in the excerpt below:

“I dropped out of school in Form Three after getting pregnant from a relationship with a married man.... The following year his wife died and this gave me an opportunity to move into his house with our baby who was now eight months old. He had a son of six years from his 1st marriage..... A year later I gave birth to our daughter.He did not provide for the needs of the children. Every time we met, we were fighting.... Life became unbearable..... I started drinking heavily to keep my mind off my problems. ...I was charged of child neglect, drunkenness and for being abusive” (WPBI, 2024).

As reflected in the quote above, dependency on substances in Kenya is more linked to involvement in criminal activities such as child neglect, spousal and child murders, prostitution, forgery and alcohol related crimes (Njeru, 2012).

Dysfunctional Relationships

The study sought to find out if women in prison had dysfunctional relationships either from family of origin or spousal relationships. To test the relationship status of women offenders, the respondents were first asked questions in relation to their spouses. Table 4 summarizes the distribution of responses on how the respondents viewed their relationship with their spouses.

Table 4: Relationship with Significant Other (Spouse or Boyfriend)

Relationship with significant Other Indicator	Yes	No
No (138) In a spousal relationship	43.9%	56.1%
I would be happier and not in prison today if I was not in a spousal relationship	55%	45%
Spouse contributed to imprisonment	50%	50%

Source: (Researcher, 2024)

Findings on Table 4 above show that 43.9% respondents were in a spousal relationship, while 56.1% were not. However, 55% reported that they would be happy and not in prison at the time if they were not in a relationship with their spouses. This has the implication that they blame their woes on their relationships. The findings were corroborated by qualitative data. The women inmates attributed their criminal behavior to stress related to dysfunctional relationships as shown in the excerpts below:

One respondent serving a 15-year jail term had this to say:

“I regret what I did but it was out of provocation..... [pause].... I was so distressed about my husband’s relationship with this other woman whom he met at his workplace. This “mpango wa kando” (concubine) destroyed our marriage. I could not take it any more...that was when I took the bottle of acid and splashed on the woman’s face.....This was what landed me into this prison” (WPN4, 2024).

Another respondent on a life sentence had this to say:

“I have now accepted my fate. I have been in this prison for 18 years falsely accused of conspiring with a gang to kill my ex-husband.... When he was car jacked, robbed and murdered, we had been married for three years.....I suffered in an abusive marriage. Finally, I moved out, leaving my three children behind....[Oh!]... I had hoped I would live a happy life, but this was not to be. It all ended up like this. I now leave all in God’s hands” (WPK3, 2024).

As seen from the excerpts above, a number of incarcerated women reports living in difficult spousal relationships prior to incarceration. The common issues range from infidelity, violence, irresponsibility and non-commitment to family responsibilities. Sometimes an accusation is leveled on the victim by the parents of the man for stressing their son or not being submissive to their son as expected of the “African” woman. In some cases, these issues accelerate fights and end up in serious harm or become fatal when weapons are used.

Self-Esteem and Self-Efficacy in Women Prisoners

Self-esteem and self-efficacy in women offenders are concepts that are couched within the discourse of “empowerment”. The study aimed at establishing whether reduced self-esteem and self-efficacy contributed to offending behaviors in women. Table 5 shows the questions and results obtained in measuring the levels of self-esteem of the respondents, while Table 6 shows the questions and results from the generalized self-efficacy scale that determined the respondents’ levels of self-efficacy.

According to Table 5, respondents were asked questions with an aim to establish their level of self-esteem. The table below shows the study findings.

Table 5: The Level of Self-esteem in Women Prisoners

Indicator of Relationship with family of origin	Mean	Std. Dev.
I am a person of worth and equal to others	1.50	0.77
I feel that I have many good qualities	1.51	0.52
I feel that I am not a failure in life	2.89	1.17
I can do things well just like many other people	1.47	0.82
I have much success to be happy about	2.32	1.11
I think positively about myself	1.91	1.09
I am satisfied with myself	2.30	1.18
I do not do things that I later regret	2.24	1.12
I don't feel useless at all	2.56	2.10
Score on Rosenberg Self-esteem	18.70 (52%)	

Source: (Researcher, 2024)

From the Table 5 above, the study found a Rosenberg score of 52% meaning that on average, women in Kenyan prisons have a normal self-esteem. The study explored how a normal self-esteem could relate to criminality in women offenders. The findings suggest that an elated self-esteem may translate to aggressive behaviors when one's ego is threatened by anxiety or negative criticism as suggested in psychoanalytic theory (Burger, 2018).

The study further employed the Generalized Self- Efficacy tool to measure the women offenders' level of self- efficacy. The table below shows the findings of the study.

Table 6: Respondent's Scores on the Generalized Self-Efficacy

Testing statements	Average Maximum Possible Score	Average Actual Score	Std. Dev.
When I make plans, I am always sure I will do it	3.0	1.68	0.51
I normally don't have problems beginning to do my work	3.0	2.14	2.20
I always try doing the things I find difficult without giving up	3.0	1.84	2.54
I always set goals for myself and achieve them	3.0	1.82	0.56
I never give up on doing things before completing	3.0	2.10	0.64
I don't avoid trying to do work that is difficult	3.0	1.91	0.77
When I decide to do something, I do begin immediately	3.0	1.50	0.64
When I try to learn something new, I don't give up till I succeed	3.0	2.15	1.90
When an unexpected problem occurs, I do try to solve it	3.0	1.44	0.60
I don't avoid learning new things when they look difficult	3.0	1.95	0.77
Failure at 1st attempt in doing something makes me try more	3.0	1.47	0.61
I feel capable of doing most things by myself	3.0	1.97	0.75
I don't always need to be helped by others to complete tasks	3.0	2.18	0.68
I always feel capable of dealing with most problems that I face in life	3.0	2.02	0.63
Average Cumulative Score	42.0	26.17	
Average Percentage Score	100%	47%	

Source: (Researcher, 2024)

The result for self-efficacy of the respondents The result for self-efficacy of the respondents using the generalized self-efficacy tool showed an average score of 47%, which was a below average score for a normal self-efficacy. This implied that a higher number of women offenders had low self-efficacy that could contribute to their criminal behaviors.

1.5 Discussion

Victimization

Victimization of women offenders takes different forms. These correspond to traumatic factors such as sexual physical and emotional abuse. As already been mentioned in the introductory section, victimization affects both children and adults by distorting the cortex of the brain and thus the thinking patterns of an individual. Some of the women offenders are victims of abuse from childhood which affects their normal development and growth including patterns of behaviors that may correspond to criminal behaviors.

As cited in the above case, women in Kenya today engage in capital offenses like assault or murder that were in the past only associated with men. It appears though that some of the women offenders usually do not intentionally kill their spouses at the time of the incident. When attacked and in the process of self-defense, they find themselves committing a crime that leads to arrest and subsequently being incarcerated. This changes their lives completely as many of such cases culminate in life imprisonment and after a long and stressful court process. The quote above is an example of self-defeatist behaviors, a result of emotional distress that could be an overtime event. As noted in Onyango-Israel (2013) the women often overpower their spouses who in such attacks may be intoxicated. However, many end up committing the crime because their self-regulatory power is undermined. It is, therefore, possible to argue that it is the psychological problems such as distress, some levels of depression and distorted cognition that are at the core of offending behavior in women.

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

PTSD has the ability to numb individuals emotionally that could make individuals act irresponsibly. (Van Voorhis et.al. 2010; Salisbury, 2007) notes the high link between PTSD and impulsive behaviors, for example eating disorders, alcohol and/or drug abuse, deliberate self-harm and suicide. Similarly, victimization and in particular sexual and physical abuses in women offenders are found to have connections with PTSD. Women offenders commit crimes through use of substances as a means to “self-medicate” the intense and distressing symptoms, of PTSD associated with their life circumstances. The findings of this study therefore support other studies (James & Glaze, 2006; Elliott, Bjelajac, Falot, Markoff & Reed, 2005) that addressed the direct link between PTSD and delinquent behaviors amongst women prisoners, particularly those that had run away from home because of the chaotic and non-receptive home environment. The outlook of offenders’ contextual variables mirrored in the high rates of PTSD suggests a great necessity for the development of screening tools and comprehensive trauma informed services that address the complexity of PTSD and other mental health issues in women (Elliott et al., 2005).

Parental Distress in Women Prisoners

Parental distress has the ability to create constant worries in the women who are mothers. Constant worries from majority of the offenders could suggest that the women were anxious about the future of their children most of the times with minimal chances of securing a source of income when released from prison. From a cognitive theory perspective, constant anxiety/worry can lead to social anxiety disorder associated with low capacity in coping with life challenges or an increase to vulnerability to depressogenic thoughts and situations, highly characterized in mothers incarcerated due to criminal activities associated with parental distress (Gurman & Messer, 2003). Further, Elster cited by Gurman & Messer (2003) observes that such factors associated with social anxiety disorder limit rational decision-making. From criminal psychology, the strain theory postulates that crime is a result of conflict between people's goals and the means they can use to obtain it (Sikand & Reddy, 2017). The women appear to lack the ability of providing a good future for their children. This coupled with poor social support, especially from the significant others seems to push them into criminal behavior. Arguably, challenges posed by a parenting role contribute significantly to alcohol or drug abuse in women. Perhaps unaware of the dangers of dependency on drugs or alcohol abuse, these women use the substances to numb their pains coming with their distress, but other than numbing it leads to poor self-regulation leading to criminal behavior.

Dysfunctional Relationships

As noted in the quotes above, the women often try to persevere in the abusive marriages for the sake of their young children. However, others eventually choose to quit and move on with their lives regardless of what awaits them in the future. Thus, most of the women in lacking avenues to cope with the marital and strenuous relationships will opt for ways of dealing with their pains. Most of them choose to numb their pains through use of substance, whereby the substance in use becomes as a means of consolation and therefore negatively affecting one's rationality, often culminating in criminal behaviors. Several studies (Bhati & Roman, 2010; Gizzi & Gerkin, 2010) explain the effects of long-term abuse of substances to the brain. Notably, substance abuse alters the optimal concentration of glutamate (a neurotransmitter that influences the reward circuit and the ability to learn), leading to impairment of cognitive functioning. The alterations in the brain of a substance user explain irrationality in reasoning and judgment; decision-making and behavior control in offenders (Van Voorhis & Salisbury, 2014).

Since dysfunctional spousal relationships involve a range of issues that affects perceived desirable behaviors in women. The finding of the study, therefore, signals the importance of rehabilitation programs constituting a curriculum that would help women offenders with opportunities to regain their diminished zest or vitality, self-worth and disempowerment. It is important that rehabilitation programs be broad-based to incorporate components such as: life skills, depression and therapy, drugs and addiction treatment.

Self-esteem and Self-Efficacy in Women Offenders

On Self-esteem of the women prisoners, the study found a Rosenberg score of 52% meaning that on average, women in Kenyan prisons have a normal self-esteem. The finding of this study contradicts the findings of a study (Koons, Burrow, Morash & Bynum, 1997; Morash, Bynum, Koons, 1998) that revealed poor self-esteem amongst the women offenders. The finding of the current study reflects an argument posed about the dark side of self-esteem by several scholars. For example, Baumeister (1997)

suggested that people with high self-esteem are more likely to be conceited, arrogant, or occasionally narcissistic. The vignette below may perhaps illustrate how an elevated self-esteem can lead one to criminality in an attempt to protect a threatened ego.

“.....I could not take it any more.....I insisted we go and talk with the “other” woman who was destroying our marriage....She went on to brag by asking me to ask myself why my husband was not satisfied with me....The provocation was too much.....! She reckoned that my husband was not interested in me because I did not wash my smelly vagina..... I poured the sulfuric acid on her face.... (WPL6, 2024).

The above quote does not portray a picture of a person with low but rather an enhanced self-esteem, and possibly a heightened “ego.” Such personalities often expect to receive positive evaluations from others; if they are provided with negative feedback, a threatened ego motivates them to spend personal resources on coping with the negative evaluations. Similar to the above view, Neff (2011) pointed out that high score on self-esteem scales can result from narcissism – a highly inflated, grandiose view of oneself and one’s positive traits and competence, conjoined with a sense of entitlement. Pervan & Hunter (2007) found that elevated self-esteem among inmates was highly associated with aggressive behavior, particularly when heightened egoism is threatened. Similarly, according to Kaplan’s theory on enhancement model (Kaplan, 1984; 1980), delinquency among the youth is associated with enhanced self-esteem. Further, Shine, McCloskey & Newton (2008) found that inmates with high self-esteem had higher levels of physical active aggression than inmates with low self-esteem. The arguments above may imply that enhanced self-esteem is not always a protective factor, but it can make people vulnerable to criminal behavior. These views posed above may thus explain the reasons of criminality amongst respondents with high self-esteem in the current study. In rehabilitation, women offenders with heightened self-esteem would learn to moderate and appropriately use this positive resource within them while those with poor esteem would be empowered to boost their low self-esteem. ‘Empowerment’ is a booster to self-esteem in women, thus a buffer in criminal engagement. According to Stino & Palmer (1998), programs that incorporate literacy in reading and writing are some of the creative ways that may strengthen self-image in women offenders while at the same time act as an intervention on stress management associated to criminal activities.

Using the generalized self-efficacy tool to measure self-efficacy, the respondents scored an average of 47%, which was a below average score for a normal self-efficacy. This may imply that majority of the respondents had poor beliefs in their capabilities to achieve goals or outcomes in whatever tasks they engaged in and would be less likely to make concerted effort where need be. Moreover, these people consider challenging tasks as threats to be avoided thus the need to address low self-efficacy in women offenders. Planning for instance is an important aspect of working towards the achievement of goals in life. Accordingly, planning is a life management strategy which allows individuals to structure and to manifest control in their lives (Prenda & Lachman, 2001). This skill is crucial not only for the achievement of life goals but also for life satisfaction which could be a buffer against criminality. Through proper planning, individuals are able to achieve the tasks thereby boosting their self-efficacy. However, as noted the women in prison score very low on planning which may be suggestive that they are poor at goal accomplishment.

Goal setting is yet another important activity that demonstrates self-efficacy. Goal setting has been found to strengthen self-regulation which has an impact on behavior (Davids, 2015). Individuals who believe in themselves are able to set goals that are meaningful to their lives that divert their attention

from criminal activity. According to Locke & Latham (1990), goals direct attention and action. The implication is that if individuals have high self-efficacy, they are able to align their actions with more beneficial activities that may act as a buffer towards criminality. Goal setting also enhances self-evaluation (Locke & Latham, 2006). Individuals who set goals are able to self-monitor and make judgments about their performance. Their ability to perform well motivates them to set even higher goals which they pursue to the end. On the contrary, low self-efficacy is associated with anxiety that may make individuals vulnerable to criminal behavior. It is therefore not surprising that they scored low on goal setting.

Poor problem-solving skills are not only associated with low self-efficacy but also a recipe of criminality. Parto & Besharat (2011) observe that problem solving is positively associated with self-efficacy and is an important ingredient for healthy behavior and behavior regulations. Citing Bandura, the authors argue that individuals with low self-efficacy avoid tasks that they perceive to be higher than their ability. Failure in life goals erodes self-efficacy of individuals. Luszczynska, Cao, Mallach, Mazurkiewicz and Schwarzer, (2010) observe that people do not tackle challenging tasks if they harbor self-doubts. This may explain why the inmates end up committing crimes since they do not address the life challenges before, they build up. On failure, people with high level of self-efficacy are not only likely to succeed in life but also more likely to bounce back and recover from failure (Southwick & Charney, 2012), not likely to be the experience in women offenders with low-self-efficacy. Similarly, persons with high self-efficacy will recognize that failure at first attempt in doing something will make them try even harder. However, people with low self-efficacy tend to give up easily when setbacks creep into their lives. Moreover, these people consider challenging tasks as threats to be avoided. Since they do not have confidence in their ability to achieve, their feelings of failure could result in depressive moods associated with low self-efficacy that could explain involvement in criminality from adolescence through to adulthood (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Vittorio & Concetta, 2001). Studies (Covington, 2007; Salisbury, 2007; Van Voorhis, 2013) show that most women offenders' low belief in their ability to succeed in life is mostly influenced by those experiences of painful, dysfunctional relationships including the traumatic events that they face as they navigate through their developmental stages of life. Rehabilitation programs aimed at empowerment rather than controlling are proposed by Bloom, Owen, & Covington (2005), and Rungay (2004), not only as ideal in boosting self-efficacy but equally important in the enhancement of self-esteem and encouragement of self-responsibility and autonomy in women prisoners.

Similarly, the current study is of the view that it is necessary to consider those cultural practices that may heighten the psychological needs of women offenders. In Kenya just like in most African communities, women remain a disadvantaged gender within the population. The study revealed for example that a considerable number of women offenders were uneducated as some of the communities would prefer educating the male child rather than the girl child and especially in cases where the economic empowerment of the family is low. Similarly, some communities still marry off girls at a tender age rather than providing them with the opportunity to go to school for the purposes of economic gain for the families through the payment of the bride price. Through the focus group discussions and interview guides, it was noted that lack of educational empowerment affected economic power, reasoning capacity, stress management that easily led to wrong decisions and actions leading to criminal behaviors e.g. fights, murder, child abandonment among others.

1.6 Conclusion

The study has established that most women offenders in Kenya have unique psychological needs notably, histories of abuse (physical or sexual abuse in childhood or adulthood), dysfunctional relationships, parental distress, reduced self-efficacy and unhealthy enhanced self-esteem. These psychological needs explain a broad range of other mental health issues such as depression, anxiety which the study did not directly explore. In view of the relational theory of women's psychological development and the R-N-R model that informed this study, it is important that women offenders' unique psychological needs associated with their criminal behaviors be assessed using contextualized tools toward effective rehabilitation during incarceration. A culturally based approach in rehabilitation is necessary to help the society continue working towards the empowerment of women that would go a long way to support them economically thus reduce the level of distress and reasoning ability that is closely associated to some specific criminal behaviors in women offender.

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